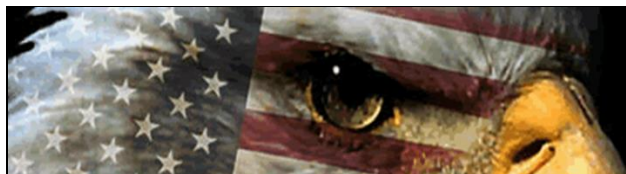



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Events, Opportunities

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HEADLINE	02/23 Seattle police union appeals to mayor
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/seattle-police-union-appeals-to-new-mayor-over-budget-plans-put-public-safety-before-politics
GIST	SEATTLE - Seattle's largest police union appealed to the new mayor, two years after fallout from the CHOP/CHAZ anti-police protest zone, and urged him to prioritize fixing the current " public safety crisis " and "put public safety before politics."

"Public safety in Seattle is at a tipping point," Seattle Police Officers' Guild wrote in an open letter to Mayor Bruce Harrell sent Monday. "As politicians realize their support of defunding the police was shortsighted, we as a community are now dealing with the inevitable results."

"Sadly, in just two years, our city has lost almost half of its police officers," the letter continued, acknowledging a mass exodus of officers from the Seattle Police Department since demonstrations swept the city following George Floyd's death. "This grim reality has unfortunately spawned an alarming rise of violent crime. Each day, the citizens of Seattle are left to deal with the fallout of shootings, homicides, robberies and violent assaults as the scales of justice hang in the balance."

In his first state of the city address last week, Harrell, who took office at the start of the year, vowed to address the public safety crisis as violent crime in Seattle reached the highest in 14 years. Shots fired across the city spiked by 40% last year, he said, and more than 40,000 homeless are on the streets.

"Mayor Harrell's promise to get control of Seattle's public safety dilemma is also positive news. His commitment to hitting the 'reset button' with the city council is politically sound and the right thing to do," Seattle Police Officers' Guild wrote Monday. "We, as the city's police officers, fully support his endeavor. As our police budget is in the hands of the council, Mayor Harrell's success is ultimately tied to our success. Wouldn't this then ultimately lead to Seattle's success?"

Violent crime reached a 14-year high in Seattle last year as the city's police department deals with a staffing shortage that is straining its ability to protect the community.

But the union also called on Harrell for a stronger statement in support of the police, arguing that staffing levels will further drop if officers cannot reestablish trust with city officials.

After Seattle voters largely rejected defund police candidates at the polls last November, electing Harrell and other candidates who ran on pro-public safety platforms, City Council still turned around and voted in favor of a 2022 city budget that slashed police funding by another estimated \$10 million.

"Success is what we all should strive for in our community. It is blatantly clear that Seattle is desperate for more qualified officers. The mayor must act immediately to tip the staffing scales," the union said.

"Equally as important to recruitment is Mayor Harrell voicing public support for our current officers. This act alone would have a profound positive impact for retaining those officers and improving morale among the rank and file. Failing to do so will be considered as more of the same from City Hall and the unprecedented loss of officers will continue to increase as will the city's violent crime."

In his speech, the mayor promised to pursue "the politics of 'and'," stressing that while there's funding for 125 new officers this year, and depleted staffing has severely slowed 911 response time, his administration would also "explore options to move away from a police-centered approach to public safety."

"We can have safety AND we can have reform," Harrell said last week. His administration also assured members of the criminal defense bar that when police make arrests the mayor's office "will make sure constitutional rights are protected; alternative forms other than arrest are explored; treatment plans are in place and that a militarized or racialized approach will not be tolerated."

The union celebrated the Democratic state legislature backtracking from the defund police movement.

"Moreover, our entire state is dealing with the reality of Seattle's crime wave as our violence has spread to other communities," the letter, from the union's president, Mike Solan, vice president, Dan Auderer, and secretary/treasurer, Walt Hayden, said. "To address this alarming crime wave, our state's politicians are now rewriting last year's police reform laws to reflect a more moderate interpretation. While not perfect (when viewed by a reasonable officer), this is positive news."

	<p>The union noted that in early 2020, before the murder of Floyd in Minneapolis, Harrell's predecessor, former Seattle Mayor Jenny Durkan, considered the Seattle Police Department to be a "model of police agency reform" and formally requested the Justice Department lift the Federal Settlement Agreement.</p> <p>"Unfortunately, soon thereafter, politics prevailed over public safety, and City Hall rescinded their termination request and started Seattle down our current path of violence," the union wrote Monday. "It is with all of this in mind, that I invite Mayor Harrell to open the lines of communication with SPOG; to begin charting a new path of collaboration and to put public safety before politics. Together we can remedy Seattle's public safety crisis. Seattle is worth saving. Wouldn't you agree Mayor Harrell?"</p> <p>Protesters commandeered six city blocks and an abandoned police station for weeks in 2020 under the guise of racial justice. Durkan's visited what protesters deemed a no-cop zone and allowed the encampment to continue for weeks until several shootings and the homicide of Black man forced city crews to eventually clear out demonstrators. Durkan did not seek reelection amid the backlash.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/23 US sanctions key Houthi finance network
SOURCE	https://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2022/02/23/houthi-yemen-sanctions-treasury-department/9071645648746/
GIST	<p>Feb. 23 (UPI) -- The U.S. Department of Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets said Wednesday it is targeting a key Houthi finance network for economic sanctions.</p> <p>A Treasury Department statement described the Houthi international finance network as being led by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force (IRGC-QF) and Houthi financier Sa'id al-Jamal.</p> <p>It said the network is financing war against the Yemeni government and "increasingly aggressive attacks threatening civilians and civilian infrastructure in neighboring states."</p> <p>"Despite pleas to negotiate an end to this devastating conflict, Houthi leaders continue to launch missile and unmanned aerial vehicle attacks against Yemen's neighbors, killing innocent civilians, while millions of Yemeni civilians remain displaced and hungry," Brian E. Nelson, undersecretary for terrorism and financial intelligence, said in a statement.</p> <p>In the statement announcing the sanctions, the Treasury Department said: "Al-Jamal directs a web of front companies and vessels that smuggle fuel, petroleum products, and other commodities to customers throughout the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. Al-Jamal is aided by Turkey-based Abdi Nasir Ali Mahamud and his network of businesses, which have served as a cover for al-Jamal's activities."</p> <p>The Treasury Department said Al-Jamal's network "has generated tens of millions of dollars in revenue with the aid of a diverse array of international commodity traders."</p> <p>An international coalition of troops led by Saudi Arabia, including UAE forces, have fought a seven-year-long war with Houthi rebels to back the Yemeni government as the country itself is engaged in a civil war widely viewed as a conflict over the influence of Iran in the region.</p> <p>The Saudis have repeatedly bombed targets in Yemen, including a strike in January after Houthis claimed responsibility for a drone attack that exploded three oil tankers in the United Arab Emirates.</p> <p>According to the United Nations, violence in Yemen continues to escalate. The U.N. says more than 650 civilian casualties were reported in January.</p> <p>Martin Griffiths, U.N. humanitarian affairs chief and emergency relief coordinator, said the war in Yemen shows no sign of abating.</p> <p>Over the past several weeks, he said, there's been a "sharp and dangerous" escalation.</p>

	"It is by far the highest toll in the last three years," he said in a statement published on the U.N. website.
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HEADLINE	02/24 Russia controls airport near Kyiv
SOURCE	https://www.newsmax.com/headline/antonov-airport-russia-ukraine/2022/02/24/id/1058292/
GIST	<p>Russian helicopters on Thursday attacked Antonov International Airport, in Hostolmel, near the capital of Kyiv, and took control.</p> <p>Ukrainian officials said three of the helicopters were downed, but the Interior Ministry reportedly confirmed that Russia managed to seize control.</p> <p>Ukrainian border officials said that the Russian military was trying to penetrate into Ukraine's Kyiv region and its Zhytomyr region on the Belarusian border and that Russia was using Grad rocket systems.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/24 Yemen Houthis detain US embassy staffer
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-iran-arrests-yemen-sanaa-527acad34ee94ec1bd5aaf9ed9fc0df1
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON (AP) — Yemen's Houthi rebels have detained another official of the long-closed U.S. Embassy there, bringing the number of local ex-U.S. Embassy staffers in the rebel group's custody to at least 11, according to accounts from Yemeni officials and others.</p> <p>The Houthis, an Iran-backed group that controls the capital, Sanaa, and much of Yemen's north, took into custody a former press officer from the U.S. Embassy last week, according to a rights lawyer in Sanaa, Abdel-Majeed Sabra, and a family member of a detainee. The family member spoke on condition of anonymity because of the fear of reprisals.</p> <p>Sabra said the former embassy press officer was being held in the Houthi-run Security and Intelligence Authority facility. It's not known whether Houthis have charged the man or any other of the detainees from the U.S. Embassy staff, he said.</p> <p>Sabra said the latest staffer was detained a month after the rebel group arrested his former deputy at the embassy.</p> <p>Houthi rebels brought the latest embassy staffer back to his home on Tuesday to search it, and took him away again.</p> <p>The State Department said in an email to The Associated Press this week that the U.S. government was "unceasing" in efforts to secure the release of the local embassy staffers.</p> <p>Washington shut down its embassy in Yemen, the Arabian Peninsula's poorest nation, in 2015, as conflict fractured the country.</p> <p>Houthis had swept down from their base in the north the year before at a time of mounting political upheaval, seizing the capital and other territory. A military coalition led by Saudi Arabia entered the war in 2015.</p> <p>Houthis, with increasing support from Iran, have been able to hold off the Saudi-led military coalition. U.N. and aid agencies call the overall situation in Yemen the world's worst humanitarian crisis, with millions of Yemenis vulnerable to famine.</p> <p>Houthis have rebuffed repeated attempts by the Biden administration to get them into peace talks, and accuse the U.S. of supporting the coalition.</p>

	<p>Houthis seized the headquarters of the U.S. Embassy last October. They detained dozens of former staffers, many of whom were later released.</p> <p>With the latest detention, at least 11 staffers from the closed embassy remain in Houthi custody, however, according to a security official and a family member of the detainees. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak publicly, and the family member for fear of reprisal.</p> <p>U.N. agencies confirmed late last year that the Houthis also had arrested two of their employees in Sanaa in early November. UNESCO and the U.N. human rights office said no legal grounds were given for their detention.</p> <p>Both sides in the war in the past have used detainees as leverage in negotiations, including prisoner swaps.</p> <p>The new detention comes as the Biden administration is considering redesignating the Houthis or individual Houthi leaders as terrorists, a step that carries harsh U.S. government penalties for those doing business with them.</p> <p>That's after Houthis stepped up cross-border attacks by drone and missiles on the United Arab Emirates, in the wake of suffering heavy territorial losses in fighting.</p> <p>The U.S. deepened sanctions Wednesday on what it said was an illicit, Iran-aligned smuggling network helping to fund the Houthis, but appeared to stop short of the terrorist designation.</p> <p>Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are pushing for the terrorist designation. Some Americans and Yemenis argue it could deter Houthis in attacks and help push them into peace talks.</p> <p>Humanitarian organizations and some Democratic lawmakers say the financial penalties associated with the designation would have minimal impact on isolated Houthi leaders but drive food suppliers and shippers away from the country, risking famine for millions. Twelve Democratic lawmakers wrote Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Wednesday urging against the terror designation.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/23 Lethal bird flu Delaware poultry
SOURCE	https://www.ipost.com/breaking-news/article-698385
GIST	<p>The US Department of Agriculture reported a highly lethal form of bird flu in a commercial poultry flock in Delaware on Wednesday, expanding an outbreak that has limited exports of poultry products.</p> <p>The agency has recently reported infections of highly pathogenic avian flu in commercial turkey and chicken operations in Indiana and Kentucky, triggering trade restrictions from buyers like China.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/24 Russia attack: US, global impact
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2022/02/24/politics/putin-ukraine-russia-attack-us-global-impact/index.html
GIST	<p>(CNN)Just as diplomats at a last-minute United Nations Security Council meeting were pleading for peace, Russian fire began raining down on Ukraine.</p> <p>On a haunting night, marked by an address from Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky that felt like a eulogy for a democracy, decades of peace between nations on the European landmass ended with loud blasts in multiple Ukrainian cities. Within hours, livestream video showed a column of military vehicles streaming into the country from Belarus, where Russian troops had been massed. And thunderous explosions soon boomed over the capital Kyiv, as air raid sirens wailed, heralding a dangerous new crisis for a world already rocked by turmoil.</p> <p>President Vladimir Putin's long-feared assault will reverberate far beyond Russia and its democratic neighbor. It will bring consequences including painful spikes in already high gas prices for Americans struggling to</p>

navigate out of a once-in-a-century pandemic. And it may rekindle a Cold War that had once seemed a relic of history, creating a precarious new standoff between the US and Russia, the world's largest nuclear powers. [President Joe Biden](#) will unveil [the most punishing set of sanctions ever imposed against Russia](#) when he addresses the nation later Thursday.

"(The) invasion has begun," Anton Gerashchenko, an adviser to Ukraine's interior minister, told reporters, describing missile strikes on airfields and military headquarters in Kyiv, as CNN teams on the ground witnessed blasts and artillery fire elsewhere at the start of a conflict the US has warned could cost thousands of civilian lives.

Putin, in an unscheduled televised address dripping with false claims about genocide perpetrated against ethnic Russians in eastern regions of Ukraine, declared an operation to "demilitarize and denazify Ukraine." His malfeasance recalled the dark maneuvers of dictators in the 1930s that pitched the world into war. His reference to Nazis raised the idea of political purges and suggested a mindset seemingly verging on paranoia.

It was the surreal moment when a leader traumatized and obsessed by the collapse of the Soviet Union, which he witnessed as a rank-and-file KGB officer in former East Germany, launched a battle to avenge forces of history and erase the freedoms and democracy of a people of an independent, sovereign nation.

Ukraine is a former Soviet republic that went its own way after the collapse of communism -- and gave up nuclear weapons in exchange for now-violated security guarantees from Moscow. It yearns for a future in the West, but Putin sees its quest for democracy as a threat to his own autocratic rule and wants to ensure the country never attains its dream of membership in NATO.

America suddenly faces a dangerous new crisis

Apart from the challenge to the US-led world order and what was once known as the free world, Americans will pay a price for this attack, though they are not, like the people of Ukraine, coming under fire.

Higher gas prices and inflation are certain. Oil raced above \$100 a barrel almost as soon as the Russian assault started.

And since Putin had been demanding pullbacks from NATO in ex-Soviet satellite states that had joined the organization, this is America's crisis too. The United States will not send troops to fight Russia directly in Ukraine, given that as a non-NATO member, Ukraine does not enjoy the alliance's mutual defense guarantees. But it is almost certain that Washington will have to send troops back to bolster its European allies and to bases they began to leave 30 years ago. The Baltic nations of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia look suddenly vulnerable and, unlike Ukraine, are NATO members the US is treaty bound to defend. There is also the possibility of a US-funded insurgency in Ukraine, raising the risky prospect of a new proxy war between Washington and Moscow.

More broadly, Putin's attack on Ukraine is another challenge to America's global power and the concept of a free and democratic world that multiplies its influence. Liberal democracy now faces a fearsome challenge, not just from a revanchist Russia but from a rising, authoritarian super power in China. And unlike during the Cold War, when all parties stood firm in the face of a 40-year struggle against communism, America's own democracy is reeling, threatened by a former President who tried to cling to power.

In a sign of the shattered fabric of US national unity, ex-President Donald Trump, fresh from declaring Putin a "genius" on Tuesday, quickly called into Fox and lied that a "rigged election" in the US saddled Americans with an illegitimate President and emboldened the Russian leader -- over whom he himself always fawned.

A poignant address

The true nature of the Russian assault, and its significance for the rest of the world, shone through a poignant address by Zelensky, who said he had called Putin earlier and got only silence on the line.

Pleading with the people of Russia in their own language, Zelensky said: "You are being told this fire will free the Ukrainian people. But Ukrainian people are free."

The Ukrainian President, a former comedian now charged with narrating a national tragedy, told Russians, "We want to determine our history by ourselves. In peace, calm and honesty." And in a chilling aside, hours before guns again rang out over a continent stained with the blood of millions lost in tyrants' wars, Zelensky noted the lesson that localized battles rarely stay that way in a region cursed by history -- a point underscored by the tens of thousands of US graves in Europe from two world wars. "This step can become a beginning of a great war at the European continent," he said.

Former US Defense Secretary William Cohen, speaking to CNN's Anderson Cooper, made a similar point. "Starting a war in a dry place, so to speak, can set off a wild fire," he said.

A risk for Putin

The extent and duration of the operation led by tens of thousands of Russian troops massed around Ukraine is not yet certain. But its purpose is clear. One autocratic Russian leader has made the choice to deprive millions of Ukrainians of their right to make their own decisions about their country and its future. Their obvious preference is not to be ruled by Russia.

A senior US official familiar with the latest US intelligence said that the early assessment was that this was the start of the full Russian invasion long predicted by the United States.

Putin has long chafed against what he sees as disrespect from America following the Cold War and NATO's eastern expansion to encompass ex-Soviet allies like Poland, Romania and Hungary. This explains why the conflict might be located in Ukraine, but it's also a broader challenge to Washington.

In the early fog of war, it is too early to tell the extent of resistance the Russians would face, if they would topple the government in Ukraine, or if the illegal invasion could cause an insurgency that could kill Russian troops and create conditions that could challenge Putin's regime.

One Russia expert, former senior CIA officer Paul Kolbe, said that the invasion of a nation that is larger than France or Germany could eventually create an unsustainable situation for the Russians and was an enormous gamble.

"Putin is going to try to swallow a porcupine here and it is going to be hard for the Russian bear to digest it," Kolbe told CNN's Erin Burnett.

"This is a conflict that is going to extend over months and years whether the invasion goes well for Putin or not. He is going to change the shape of Europe and is going to set enduring lines of conflict within Ukraine and on the borders of Ukraine with the West," he added.

Moments before the assault started, diplomats had gathered in the UN Security Council chamber for a meeting chaired, in a bitter quirk of the world body's schedule, by the Russian ambassador.

UN Secretary-General António Guterres made [a last-ditch plea](#) for invasion orders to be countermanded.

"I have only one thing to say from the bottom of my heart. President Putin, stop your troops from attacking Ukraine. Give peace a chance. Too many people have already died."

It was already too late.

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SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2022/02/24/investing/ruble-russian-stocks-crash/index.html
GIST	<p>London/Paris (CNN Business) Russian stocks crashed by more than 40% and the ruble hit a record low against the dollar on Thursday.</p> <p>The Moscow market rout was triggered by news that Russian troops had launched an attack on Ukraine, a move that is likely to trigger a new wave of "full scale" sanctions aimed at President Vladimir Putin's inner circle and Russia's oil-dependent economy.</p> <p>A broad offensive by Russian forces targeted military infrastructure across Ukraine as well as several airports. The assault began hours before dawn and quickly spread across central and eastern Ukraine as Russian forces attacked from three sides. Putin warned of bloodshed unless Ukrainian forces lay down their arms.</p> <p>The Moscow stock exchange had suspended trading earlier on Thursday but when dealing resumed, stocks went into free-fall.</p> <p>The MOEX index plunged as much as 45%, while the RTS index — which is denominated in dollars — was down 37% at 7.15 a.m. ET. The crash wiped about \$70 billion off the value of Russia's biggest companies.</p> <p>Russian banks and oil companies were among the hardest hit in volatile trading, with shares in Sberbank (SBRCY) — Russia's largest lender — at one stage losing 57% of their value. Rosneft, in which BP (BP) owns a 19.75% stake, plunged as much as 58%, before steadying a little. BP shares dropped 4% in London. Gazprom (GZPFY), the giant gas company behind the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, was down 40%.</p> <p>The ruble was trading at 84 to the dollar, down 3%, after earlier hitting a new record low of 89.60. The Russian central bank said it would intervene in the currency market and provide extra liquidity to the banking sector.</p> <p>"This emotional reaction was inevitable, but at the same time it will stabilize," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said in a call with foreign journalists. "All the necessary measures have been taken for this," he added.</p> <p>The United States, European Union, United Kingdom and other allies announced limited new sanctions on Russia earlier this week after Moscow said it would send troops into two breakaway regions of eastern Ukraine. Germany said it was suspending certification of the controversial Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline.</p> <p>US, EU and UK officials have made clear that much tougher measures would follow should Russia invade.</p> <p>German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock said on Thursday the European Union is set to unleash "the full packet of sanctions" against Russia, adding that the world must respond resolutely or run the risk of paying an even higher price.</p> <p>"We woke up in a different world today," Baerbock told reporters at a news conference in Berlin, adding "we will launch the full package of massive sanctions against Russia."</p> <p>The Baltic states of Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia called for Russia to be ejected from SWIFT, the secure messaging services that facilitates payments among 11,000 financial institutions in 200 countries.</p> <p>"The entire international community must firmly condemn Russia's aggression and impose the toughest possible sanctions in response to such outrageous acts, including disconnecting Russian banks from the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT)," the foreign ministers of the three countries said in a joint statement.</p>

	<p>In a statement, SWIFT said it was "a neutral global cooperative" and "any decision to impose sanctions on countries or individual entities rests solely with the competent government bodies and applicable legislators."</p> <p>Excluding Russia from SWIFT would cause its economy to shrink by 5%, former finance minister Alexei Kudrin estimated in 2014 — the last time this sanction was considered in response to Russia's annexation of Crimea</p> <p>Sberbank said it was prepared for any developments and had worked through scenarios to guarantee its customers' funds, assets and interests were protected, Reuters reported.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/24 NATO activates defense forces
SOURCE	https://www.foxnews.com/politics/nato-to-activate-defense-forces-russia-invasion-ukraine-says-peace-shattered
GIST	<p>NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg spoke out against Russia's military offensive against Ukraine and provided some details of how the organization plans to combat any threat to member states.</p> <p>During a news conference Thursday morning, Stoltenberg said the North Atlantic Council decided to activate their defense plans so they can send NATO forces to wherever they are needed.</p> <p>"NATO's core task is to protect and defend all allies. There must be no room for miscalculation or misunderstanding," Stoltenberg said.</p> <p>The secretary general said they are deploying forces "on land, at sea, and in the air," including thousands of troops, at least 120 allied ships, and more than 100 jets "on high alert, protecting our air space."</p> <p>"We will continue to do whatever is necessary to shield the alliance from aggression," he said.</p> <p>"Peace cannot be taken for granted. Freedom and democracy are contested by authoritarian regimes," Stoltenberg declared.</p> <p>"We will protect our people and our values. Democracy will always prevail over autocracy. Freedom will always prevail over oppression," he said.</p> <p>Ukraine, however, is not a NATO member, and Stoltenberg made clear that while the country is considered "a highly-valued partner," NATO will not be getting directly involved within the country.</p> <p>"There are no NATO troops at all inside Ukraine," Stoltenberg said, adding that "we don't have any plans to put NATO troops in Ukraine."</p> <p>Stoltenberg spoke sternly against Russia and did not downplay the gravity of the situation.</p> <p>"Peace in our continent has been shattered," he said, calling the Russian invasion "a brutal act of war" and "a deliberate, cold-blooded, and long-planned invasion."</p> <p>Stoltenberg accused Russia of "using force to try to rewrite history," stating that "the Kremlin's aim is to reestablish its sphere of influence ... and subvert the values that we hold dear."</p> <p>He called on Russia "to immediately cease" their military actions, but when asked about holding talks with the Kremlin, he said that is not currently an option.</p> <p>"Russia has shut the door to a political solution. We regret that, but that is sadly the reality," he said.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/23 FTC targets firms auto warranty robocalls
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2022/02/23/ftc-car-warranty-robocalls/
GIST	<p>I took the call out of curiosity.</p> <p>I get several robocalls a week from companies saying that my manufacturer's factory car warranty has expired and that I'll be in a heap of financial trouble if I don't get an extended plan right away.</p> <p>Scary letters come regularly with the words "FINAL NOTICE" and "EXTREMELY URGENT," warning that I need to extend my auto warranty or I'll be financially liable for all repairs.</p> <p>I decided to listen to a pitch. All kinds of promises were made, including that I would have "bumper to bumper" coverage.</p> <p>Then came the discussion about cost. For the lump-sum price of about \$6,000, I could cover my 2006 Honda Odyssey, which is nearing 200,000 miles. I could also pay for the plan in monthly installments, the salesman said.</p> <p>For that amount of money, I could just fund major repairs myself, I protested.</p> <p>No problem, the salesman said, lowering the warranty cost to about \$5,000. After several price cuts, he finally said he could offer the extended-warranty policy for about \$3,000.</p> <p>This type of telemarketing call is repeated across the country. In some cases, it's a scam. Or, people pay for a warranty that has so many exclusions, it's useless, according to the Federal Trade Commission.</p> <p>This month, the FTC filed a complaint against a Florida-based company, American Vehicle Protection Corp. (AVP), and other defendants alleging they bilked consumers out of more than \$6 million over the past four years. The FTC accuses the company of deceptive marketing practices that included misrepresenting to consumers that it was calling on behalf of a dealer or car manufacturer and offering policies that didn't provide the extensive coverage as promised during calls with consumers. The FTC also said the company violated the law by calling consumers who were on the National Do Not Call Registry.</p> <p>"Once you look at the fine print, which of course people can't see when they're talking on the phone, it is far from a comprehensive warranty," Samuel Levine, director of the FTC's Bureau of Consumer Protection, said in an interview. "It is far from bumper-to-bumper coverage. The protections are quite weak."</p> <p>The FTC's complaint says AVP's extended-warranty prices ranged from \$2,800 to \$3,400.</p> <p>In a statement and in its own lawsuit against the FTC, AVP argues not only that the FTC is wrong but also that the agency doesn't have the authority to pursue relief for consumers. AVP's lawsuit specifically points to a unanimous decision by the Supreme Court last year that ruled the FTC overstepped by forcing companies engaged in deceptive business practices to provide billions of dollars in monetary relief to consumers.</p> <p>"While AVP disagrees that it was violating the law, it embarked upon an extensive and unprecedented revamping of its policies and practices to ensure compliance," according to the statement, emailed by the company's attorney, Mitchell N. Roth.</p> <p>Last year, the FTC received more than 427,000 complaints from consumers regarding telemarketing calls for warranty and protection plans, with the vast majority involving extended auto warranty pitches. Consumers are fed up with the unsolicited, annoying calls and often deceptive letters about extended car warranties.</p> <p>"We want to send a clear message that blasting consumers with robocalls, selling them bogus bumper-to-bumper warranties is not going to be tolerated by the commission," Levine said.</p>

	<p>In testimony before a Senate subcommittee this month, Levine said that during the course of the pandemic, there's been a disturbing surge in consumer complaints, with Americans being targeted by predators large and small.</p> <p>As consumers struggle to cope with covid-related price increases, it's easy to see how many people look to these extended warranties to help with expensive repair costs for their cars.</p> <p>Without referring specifically to the AVP case, Levine talked about the gap between what people think is covered when they are talked into buying these plans and what is actually delivered. The FTC has a webpage devoted to the pitfalls of auto warranty policies. (At ftc.gov, search for "Extended Warranties and Service Contracts.")</p> <p>Consumers should be aware that sometimes the warranty coverage duplicates protection they already have on their automobiles. Often the contracts will have major exclusions for the most expensive repairs. Normal wear and tear may not be included. The warranty may cover only a portion of repair replacement costs based on mileage.</p> <p>"We see a number of pitfalls in this space where the claims that are being made over the phone are not backed up with the actual coverage consumers are getting," Levine said.</p> <p>My advice: Hang up when you get a call about an extended auto warranty plan. Toss that intimidating letter in the recycling bin. Just save the money you would use to pay for one of these plans, which in the end may save you a lot of aggravation.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/23 Report: hundreds of gas leaks found in DC
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2022/02/23/dc-gas-leaks-sierra-club/
GIST	<p>Volunteers with a coalition of D.C. environmental and religious groups found almost 400 methane leaks throughout the city, including more than a dozen that were "potentially explosive," according to a report released Wednesday.</p> <p>The report from Beyond Gas DC — a coalition run by the Sierra Club that includes environmental and religious organizations in the region — came as some D.C. residents testified Wednesday before the D.C. Council's Committee on Business and Economic Development, urging the city to switch to clean energy sources to protect the planet and public health.</p> <p>Over the past year, the report said, volunteers measured methane emissions across all eight D.C. wards using an "industry-grade" detector. The volunteers found 389 leaks, according to the report, including 14 leaks at or exceeding 50,000 parts per million — a level the report said was "potentially explosive."</p> <p>Many leaks were found near utility access caps, the report said, and the actual number of leaks is likely "many times higher" than what the groups found.</p> <p>The report concluded that a "gas distribution system across DC with zero leaks is impossible," and recommended that the city switch from gas to renewable electricity sources. Washington Gas methane accounts for 23 percent of D.C.'s total greenhouse gas emissions, according to the report, which cited a D.C. Department of Energy and Environment estimate that upgrading current pipeline infrastructure will cost up to \$4.5 billion.</p> <p>"Fixing the leaks we know of is a whack-a-mole approach that will not stop new leaks from forming and eventually being discovered," the report said. "Instead of spending billions of dollars on fracked gas infrastructure, another approach would be to electrify buildings with highly efficient heating systems using clean energy."</p>

	<p>In a statement, Washington Gas spokesman Bernie Tylor said the company is investing in satellite emissions detection technology, among other diagnostic tools, and a pipeline replacement plan.</p> <p>“We remain focused on modernizing our infrastructure, increasing energy efficiency in homes and offices, and introducing carbon free fuels as energy options,” Tylor said in the statement. “We take reports and concerns from the community seriously and will continue doing our part to build a clean, low carbon future.”</p> <p>At the hearing Wednesday, Lara Levison, chair of the Sierra Club’s clean energy committee, said she was a Ward 6 resident who participated in the methane metering.</p> <p>“Methane gas was leaking from almost every manhole and meter cover that we checked,” she said. “Most of the amounts we found that day were small, but small leaks add up.”</p> <p>Rosa Lee, a 74-year-old retired social worker, said in an interview with The Washington Post that she has owned her home in Northeast Washington’s River Terrace since 1986. She found out about the leak-monitoring program through her church and became an eager participant, helping find some leaks that were severe enough to smell.</p> <p>“I grew up as a child with a gas stove and never considered there was anything wrong with it or unhealthy,” she said. “Once you learn more, you do more with what you know.”</p>
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HEADLINE	02/23 ‘Stealth’ omicron cases slowly rise
SOURCE	https://www.usnews.com/news/health-news/articles/2022-02-23/as-mask-mandates-fall-ba-2-stealth-omicron-cases-slowly-rise
GIST	<p>After the omicron variant sent coronavirus cases, hospitalizations and deaths soaring during winter months, the metrics are all on the decline in the U.S., prompting state and local officials to relax mitigation measures.</p> <p>But a subvariant of omicron that is even more transmissible than the lineage that caused the worst coronavirus surge the U.S. has ever seen is lurking, and experts warn it could prolong the latest wave as people are eager to drop their masks and move into a “new phase” of the pandemic.</p> <p>Cases of BA.2, one of four omicron subvariants, are roughly doubling each week. It was responsible for nearly 4% of new coronavirus cases last week, according to estimates from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. That’s up from 2% of cases the week before and 1% the week before that.</p> <p>While the increase is small and slower than some predicted, experts warn that the relaxation of mitigation measures could help the subvariant take hold in the U.S.</p> <p>BA.2, which has been informally referred to as “stealth” omicron, is already the dominant lineage in 18 countries, according to the World Health Organization. It is considered even more infectious than other – already deemed highly contagious – omicron subvariants. Similar to the original omicron subvariant, it appears to decrease vaccine efficacy. It also shows signs of resistance to some monoclonal antibody treatments, according to preliminary research.</p> <p>New findings out of Denmark that haven’t been peer reviewed also suggest BA.2 can reinfect people shortly after they recover from the more common lineage of omicron, though the occurrence is “rare” and is seen “mostly in young unvaccinated individuals with mild disease not resulting in hospitalization or death.”</p> <p>The start of BA.2’s spread in the U.S. comes as every state but Hawaii has dropped or plans to drop indoor mask mandates.</p>

The timing of ending mitigation measures presents challenges to understanding the subvariant, says Brianne Barker, an associate professor of biology at Drew University. For one, it makes it difficult to know how much of the BA.2 caseload increases are due to higher transmissibility versus opportunity since it started circulating as mitigation measures fell.

The removal of mask mandates while cases remain elevated could also give BA.2 a boost, according to Jennifer Surtees, an associate professor of biochemistry at the University of Buffalo.

“That’s where I worry about BA.2 potentially being able to get a foothold and finding people who don’t already have immunity or have waning immunity,” Surtees says.

“If we stay the course a little bit longer, we could actually prevent BA.2 from getting a foothold,” she adds.

Both Barker and Surtees say BA.2 could prolong the omicron wave.

“When I look at this subvariant, it makes me think that the omicron wave ... may be a little broader and may not come down quite as sharply as at the end of some of the others have,” Barker says.

But both are clear that the coronavirus is hard to predict, and things can change quickly. Still, Surtees says the subvariant probably won’t result in another dramatic increase in cases.

“I can see it sort of prolonging this current wave that we’ve got going on,” Surtees says. “But I think at this point, I’m not sure that we’re going to see a second spike or peak the way we did when omicron came onto the scene.”

Sequencing Setbacks

While the percentage of new coronavirus cases in the U.S. from BA.2 is small, experts worry that it might not be an accurate estimate.

“It might be a little bit of a smaller increase that I might have imagined here, but I don’t know if we are doing enough sequencing of enough cases to fully have confidence in that percentage,” Barker says.

Given how many people are relying on at-home COVID-19 tests, Surtees also has concerns about sequencing – or the analysis of coronavirus samples to determine the strain responsible for infection. Those tests do not get automatically reported to health departments and can’t be sequenced. So even though more cases might be getting sequenced, it’s not an unbiased look at what is spreading across the country, according to Surtees.

And a decrease in coronavirus cases is leading to a decrease in coronavirus testing, which is worrying experts.

“We are very concerned about a reduction in testing around the world,” Maria Van Kerkhove, WHO’s technical lead on COVID-19, said on Tuesday, adding that some of the reported declines in coronavirus cases could be due to a lack of adequate testing.

Sequencing is also slightly more extensive for BA.2 compared to omicron’s other lineages. Previous omicron lineages generated a response from PCR tests that helped researchers quickly identify it. But BA.2 doesn’t offer the same shortcut for sequencing, prompting the nickname “stealth” omicron. However, PCR tests still work on BA.2.

Confusion Over a Name

Is it BA.2? Is it “stealth” omicron? Should it get its own Greek letter?

The name of the subvariant has sparked a conversation about what the public should call BA.2.

“Stealth” omicron is an unofficial nickname for the subvariant. But some experts say that calling it by its official name – BA.2 – can be confusing for the general population and have suggested the subvariant get its own Greek letter apart from omicron.

A recent study out of Japan that has not yet been peer reviewed found that, in hamsters, BA.2 appeared to cause more severe disease than its more common counterpart, BA.1.

"It looks like we might be looking at a new Greek letter here," Deborah Fuller, a virologist at the University of Washington School of Medicine, told CNN after reviewing the research.

Responding to increasing pressure, one of WHO’s advisory groups examined BA.2 to see if it was different enough from BA.1 to be distinguished by a new name. This week it announced that BA.2 would remain classified as omicron.

“Based on available data of transmission, severity, reinfection, diagnostics, therapeutics and impacts of vaccines, the group reinforced that the BA.2 sublineage should continue to be considered a variant of concern and that it should remain classified as Omicron,” WHO said in a statement on Tuesday.

WHO has acknowledged a genomic difference between BA.2 and other omicron subvariants but said that BA.2’s behavior in the real world is what is most important. And Van Kerkhove said that real-world data from several countries has not shown a difference in severity from BA.2 in terms of hospitalization rates.

“There are genetic differences but what we want to know is, is the virus behaving differently? Is BA.2 behaving differently than BA.1?” she said. “It is more transmissible, yes. But in terms of severity, we aren't seeing that – and that's really critical.”

Surtees says naming could depend on how the BA.2 situation plays out. If it starts making up more cases and prolonging the omicron wave, she says it could be useful for the public to have another Greek letter to limit confusion.

“There's an argument to be made that it's different enough at the genomic level that it could warrant its own Greek letter,” Surtees says. “However, at this point, I don't know that it's necessary.”

What seems to be certain, though, is that omicron will not be the last coronavirus variant.

“We cannot predict exactly what will happen with the exception of knowing that more variants will emerge,” Van Kerkhove said.

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HEADLINE	02/23 Mayor: Seattle PD chief decision end of March
SOURCE	https://www.kuow.org/stories/police-chief-switch-ups-in-seattle-and-bellevue-today-so-far
GIST	<p>Steve Mylett stepped down as Bellevue's police chief in July 2021. Since then, Wendell Shirley has been Bellevue's interim chief ... until today. Shirley has been officially appointed at BPD's chief. Shirley previously retired from law enforcement, but he reportedly felt the need to return to duty as calls for police reform grew louder in recent years. He came to BPD as assistant chief in March 2021. Chief Shirley says he believes in the "PIE philosophy," which stands for "Prevention, Intervention and Enforcement."</p> <p>The police chief situation is more complicated in Seattle. Adrian Diaz has been SPD's interim chief for a year and a half. And as KUOW's Ashley Hiruko reports, Diaz is the city's only contender for the job right now.</p> <p>Let's take a quick look at the past few years that have led to this point.</p>

Carmen Best entered the role as interim chief in January 2018. When it became apparent that Best wasn't being considered for the permanent job, there was [considerable pushback and outcry](#) from leaders among Seattle's African-American community and grassroots organizations. Best was put in the running and ultimately got the gig.

Fast forward two years — [Best left the job](#) after the City Council pursued cuts to SPD's funding. She also came under criticism amid 2020's protests for racial justice and the [abandonment of the East Precinct under her watch](#). Since then, she has [released a book](#) and has been [considered for a commissioner job in New York City](#).

Interim Chief Diaz has led the department since August 2020. Mayor Bruce Harrell's office says it's "important that Chief Diaz have the opportunity to show his leadership as chief while in this interim position." Unlike the intensive process for hiring a police chief — which involves a national search, a committee, and City Council approval — the interim role is an appointment that doesn't go under the same scrutiny. What is known about Diaz is that, like Best, he's been with the department as it has undergone its recent evolution and has [worked on youth-violence prevention in Seattle](#). Also, he's super into Disney movies. At this point, Mayor Harrell aims to [decide how to handle the police chief situation by the end of March](#).

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HEADLINE	02/23 UW Medicine residents walkout in Seattle
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3361340/uw-medicine-residents-physicians-walkout/
GIST	<p>Hundreds of resident physicians in the UW Medicine system staged a walk out at Seattle-area hospitals and clinics Wednesday to ask for more pay and better treatment.</p> <p>Tacoma nurse says it's hard to provide level of care 'patients deserve' with low staffing</p> <p>A physician told KIRO Newsradio earlier this week that the latest contract has no financial increase, and many say it's unfair given the high cost of living in the region. They also say many of them make less than minimum wage, and are working up to 80 hours a week.</p> <p>Dr. Yuemei Zhang, a resident physician and president of the Resident and Fellow Physician Union-Northwest, said Wednesday that most UW residents qualify for housing subsidies, and many have hundreds of thousands of dollars in student debt.</p> <p>"We're usually working 60 to 80 hours a week, which is why it works out to approximately minimum wage hourly. We are essentially in the system of indentured servitude," Zhang said.</p> <p>Zhang said they were offered a 1% raise, but because inflation was more than 7% this past year, it really comes out to a decrease in pay.</p> <p>During the pandemic, they are commonly working so many hours that they do not even get adequate time off to rest. Zhang said there are pregnant doctors who "are losing weight during pregnancy because they do not have enough time to eat or sleep."</p> <p>Trying to save a patient's life while going on 24 hours of no sleep is a dangerous combination, Zhang said.</p> <p>"This is bad for patient care and it's bad for general public safety when we are being worked so much that we're falling asleep on the job," she said, adding, "We are making very critical decisions — this is a matter of life and death."</p> <p>She added that the system of being forced to work for relatively low pay for several years while having high student loan debt means that students from privileged backgrounds are more likely to become doctors.</p>

	<p>“Especially for people from lower-income backgrounds, where you don’t have wealthy parents to pay off your tuition, you may graduate with more debt. ... When you create a system where the only people who have access to higher education, where the only people who have access to medical training may be those from wealthier backgrounds who are disproportionately white, who are disproportionately male, and do not have childhood or household responsibilities, then you are creating a system that is very disadvantageous and inequitable to people from diverse backgrounds,” Zhang said.</p> <p>She adds that the UW has not given them hazard pay, despite the fact that they have been on the frontlines throughout the pandemic, risking COVID-19 exposure for themselves and their loved ones.</p> <p>The largest walkout was expected to be outside the UW Medical Center in Montlake at 12 p.m.</p> <p>In a statement to KIRO Newsradio, UW Medicine had said it plans to continue to negotiate in good faith with the Resident and Fellow Physician Union-Northwest.</p> <p>The union represents about 20% of practicing physicians in King County, according to a UW resident physician and union member who contacted KIRO Newsradio this week. More than 500 resident physicians at UW training sites across Seattle are expected to participate in the walk out Wednesday.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/23 Activists block homeless camp removal
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3361182/activists-continue-blocking-removal-seattle-city-hall-homeless-camps/
GIST	<p>City workers were scheduled to remove a homeless camp near Seattle City Hall on Sunday. Now three days later, local advocates have continued to prevent those efforts from moving forward.</p> <p>The camp is located on Fourth Avenue between James and Columbia, where the city posted a notice of the upcoming removal last Friday. After the notice was posted, activists with a group known as Stop the Sweeps Seattle organized mutual aid volunteers to “show up and push back” on Sunday, holding the area for hours and refusing to allow city workers in to remove tents.</p> <p>The group maintained its presence Monday and Tuesday, vowing to continue blocking the attempted removal until campers are offered assistance.</p> <p>“We’re here to stay, and we’re not really going to leave until these folks here get the housing and services that they deserve,” one of the group’s advocates said in a speech delivered on Sunday.</p> <p>Over the weekend, shelter referrals were not offered for the Fourth Avenue removal. In days since, Mayor Bruce Harrell’s office has expressed that while the city aims to “do its best to offer shelter as available through the City’s HOPE Team and the efforts of the (Regional Homelessness Authority), we cannot allow tents and other structures to remain in the right of way if they are causing an obstruction or presenting a public health or safety risk.”</p> <p>“Under the City’s existing procedural rules, there is no requirement for offers of shelter when an encampment is creating an obstruction,” a spokesperson for Harrell noted.</p> <p>Encampments that aren’t causing obstructions are subject to a 72-hour removal notice, and must have outreach workers present to offer shelter and services. But as Seattle’s Human Services Department revealed in 2020, the city has frequently adopted a broad definition regarding what it defines as an obstructive camp. At the time, it estimated that 96% of removals were not subject to the outreach and 72-hour notice requirements.</p> <p>Clearing camps out of public rights of way was also a prominent plank in Harrell’s campaign platform, having ramped up removals since he took office. The city estimates that nearly a dozen encampments have been removed as of mid-February.</p>

	<p>Others in city hall have touted programs like JustCARE as alternative solutions to addressing Seattle’s downtown homeless encampments, focused on outreach work designed to offer quick temporary housing and wraparound services that make people living in encampments more inclined to accept shelter and services.</p> <p>JustCARE made its debut in June of 2021, when 33 people who had been living on the street near Third Avenue and Pike Street were voluntarily moved into available homeless shelter spaces. Of those, 14 were placed into tiny homes through the city’s HOPE Team, while another 15 to 17 were moved into hotels run by JustCARE partners. A subsequent clearance of an encampment at First Avenue and Yesler Way in November resulted in all 31 residents voluntarily accepting offers of shelter.</p> <p>A separate initiative announced last week by Mayor Harrell will use \$10 million in donations from local companies like Amazon, Starbucks, and Microsoft to fund a team of 30 outreach workers operating within the King County Regional Homelessness Authority, tasked with providing homeless campers end-to-end services to get them into permanent housing. That said, the initiative also necessitates the need for hundreds of new permanent supportive housing units, and does not provide additional funding toward that end.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/24 Invasion forges new unity for NATO
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/russia-invasion-ukraine-nato-unity-europe-11645484383
GIST	<p>BRUSSELS—NATO ambassadors gathered Thursday morning for an emergency meeting in response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine with a pledge to defend alliance members and support Ukraine, which isn’t a member.</p> <p>Russia’s attack on Ukraine, which since 2008 has had an invitation to potentially join the alliance, has breathed new life into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the U.S.-led military alliance created in the ashes of World War II to square off with Moscow.</p> <p>NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said alliance members “stand with the people of Ukraine at this terrible time” and called Russia’s assault “a grave breach of international law, and a serious threat to Euro-Atlantic security.”</p> <p>The war for Ukraine has rallied NATO’s 30 members around a shared assessment: After a quarter-century of relative peace, Europe’s security can no longer be taken for granted.</p> <p>In response to Russia’s recently increasing aggression toward Ukraine, the U.S. and allies have been beefing up their military presence in the NATO countries that border Russia—Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia—whose hawkish views on Russia once struck Western allies as a relic of the Cold War. Romania and Bulgaria, newer NATO members that face Russia across the Black Sea, have also recently welcomed additional troops and equipment from allies to the west.</p> <p>The support means that Russian President Vladimir Putin, who has justified his campaign against Ukraine partly as a response to NATO’s encroachment of Russia’s borders, faces an escalation of allied forces next to Belarus, which Russia is slowly subsuming, and Ukraine, which it now aims to dominate.</p> <p>“It’s ironic that what Putin didn’t want to see is a stronger NATO on his flank,” said U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin during a visit to Poland last week. “And that’s exactly what he will see going forward.”</p> <p>Spanish and French warships are cycling through the Black Sea. A flow of new arms sales is under way, with Washington selling sophisticated Abrams tanks and F-35 jet fighters to Poland and giving allies in Eastern Europe the green light to sell U.S.-made Javelin antitank missiles to Ukraine.</p>

Just months ago, the alliance was stung by a chaotic defeat in Afghanistan, having spent 20 years trying to rout the Taliban and build up the Afghan army. NATO was mulling a jumbled set of priorities, from combating Islamist terrorists to containing China's rise, while a fringe of right-wing and Moscow-friendly leaders from Hungary or the Czech Republic pushed for the alliance to tackle illegal migration.

For now, those voices have been drowned out, as NATO focuses squarely on the risk of conflict spilling over from the war on its doorstep. Talk of the alliance playing a greater role assisting America's rivalry with Beijing has been put on hold—a point of frustration for Washington, where officials have lamented the time and attention spent shoring up the security of Europe, instead of enlisting the bloc's help against China.

France, whose President Emmanuel Macron once pushed for a “true, European army” that could fight with or without U.S. help, has softened that rhetoric.

All the same, NATO's renewed unity could prove short-lived, if the conflict ends quickly—or runs long enough to inflict painful disruptions to the Russian gas that Europe depends on. In Central Europe, suspicion runs deep that Western allies don't have the stomach for a long struggle against Russia, especially if it hits consumers' gas bills.

In a poll published this month, only 35% of Germans deemed defending Ukraine's sovereignty worth the risk of an economic downturn; 38% considered it wasn't worth the risk, according to the European Council on Foreign Relations, which conducted the survey. In France, just 31% of people felt it was worth the risk, with 41% opposed.

For years, successive U.S. administrations fretted that Washington's biggest allies in Europe had grown complacent over 30 years since the Cold War's end, reluctant to spend on their own defense and accustomed to life under the U.S. security umbrella. European allies doubted whether NATO had a clear and relevant purpose.

“What we are currently experiencing is the brain death of NATO,” Mr. Macron said in a 2019 interview.

European leaders had been frustrated with Washington after last year's retreat from Afghanistan, which came nearly two decades after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks that prompted the first and only use of NATO's collective-defense clause. NATO's 2011 air campaign that helped topple Libya's Moammar Gadhafi set off a refugee crisis that energized nationalist leaders in Europe who have been persistent gadflies for NATO—from French presidential candidate Marine Le Pen to Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban.

Washington and Berlin had been at odds over Germany's reluctance to raise military spending, cut imports of Russian natural gas and join the U.S.'s hardening stance on China.

For the moment, the conflict in Ukraine buries those disagreements and offers a chance to find common cause.

Germany has halted Nord Stream 2, its gas pipeline with Russia—and military spending across the alliance is rising. The invasion of Ukraine is likely to accelerate that trend. Hawkish views on Russia, once concentrated in Europe's east, have gained ground in Berlin and Paris.

The military confrontation “changes things in a pretty fundamental way,” said Ivo Daalder, U.S. ambassador to NATO from 2009 to 2013. “I think it's the wake-up call that war is not just something that happens far away but it's something that happens in our neighborhood.”

Mr. Daalder predicted that NATO members would rally behind efforts to cut European reliance on Russian gas. “I bet that Nord Stream 2 will never have Russian gas flowing through it,” he said.

Return to Top	<p>That said, the alliance, which does much of its work through decisions that require unanimity, still has marginal leaders who have tried to thwart NATO's support for Ukraine, such as Croatian President Zoran Milanovic, who has demanded Croatia remain apart from any conflict with Russia.</p> <p>NATO's Mr. Stoltenberg is set to leave this year, with no clear candidate primed to succeed him. France's Mr. Macron faces presidential elections this spring, potentially influencing his stance in the alliance. Next year, Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi, who has made his country a more active member of the alliance, is set to leave office, creating uncertainty around Italy's posture.</p> <p>The longer the war drags on, with attendant sanctions and potential disruptions of trade and energy flows, the deeper that toll on Europe's economy will be, said Kristi Raik, director of the Estonian Foreign Policy Institute.</p> <p>"As the situation grows worse, the question becomes more difficult for European societies, in terms of how far we are willing to go in supporting Ukraine, especially as it means more costs for ourselves," she said. "We don't know how enduring this unity is. If things get really ugly and violent there will be costs for European societies for pushing back on Russia."</p>
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HEADLINE	02/23 Omicron variant spread: keep restrictions?
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/fast-spreading-covid-19-omicron-type-revives-questions-about-opening-up-11645616471?mod=hp_lead_pos2
GIST	<p>A more infectious type of the Omicron variant has surged to account for more than a third of global Covid-19 cases sequenced recently, adding to the debate about whether countries are ready for full reopening.</p> <p>Health authorities are examining whether the subvariant of Omicron, known as BA.2, could extend the length of Covid-19 waves that have peaked recently in Europe, Japan and some other places.</p> <p>"We're looking not only at how quickly those peaks go up, but how they come down," World Health Organization epidemiologist Maria Van Kerkhove said. "And as the decline in cases occurs...we also need to look at: Is there a slowing of that decline? Or will we start to see an increase again?"</p> <p>BA.2 accounted for only 3.9% of Covid-19 infections in the U.S. in the week through Feb. 12, according to the most recent estimate released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. After an Omicron surge in December 2021, the U.S. has experienced an equally sharp and steady fall.</p> <p>Other countries have had more trouble shrugging off Omicron. In Denmark, where an estimated 92% of cases were BA.2 as of mid-February, a peak at the end of January was followed by another two weeks later.</p> <p>Evidence so far suggests BA.2 is some 30% more infectious than its cousin, the BA.1 subvariant that kicked off the Omicron wave in southern Africa in November 2021. In South Africa, BA.2 has accounted for 82% of cases so far in February, according to health authorities in that country.</p> <p>Overall, BA.2 accounted for 35% of Covid-19 virus samples whose genomes were recently submitted to the global Gisaidd database, according to a Gisaidd update released Tuesday.</p> <p>Studies so far suggest that both types of Omicron pose about the same risk of severe disease in humans. That risk is lower than last year's Delta variant, but with so many people getting infected, the death toll from Omicron is still high.</p> <p>A South African analysis comparing a group with likely BA.1 Omicron against another group with likely BA.2 found both groups had roughly equal odds of being hospitalized and developing severe disease.</p>

Early studies suggest that vaccines and booster shots work equally well in both Omicron types in preventing serious illness. [A study by the U.K. Health Security Agency](#) found both types could easily get around the immunity of people who had received their full primary course of vaccination at least six months earlier. But a booster shot restored protection against symptomatic disease from both variants, to 69% for BA.1 and 74% for BA.2.

Still, some initial research in test tubes and animals leaves room for concern that BA.2 might be more harmful. A team led by Kei Sato at the University of Tokyo found that BA.2 had an easier time [invading the cells in the lungs of hamsters](#) compared with BA.1.

Prof. Sato said BA.2 has as many differences from BA.1 as last year's Delta variant had from the original virus detected in Wuhan, China. He said BA.2 might merit its own Greek-letter name rather than being classed as a type of Omicron.

New York University virologist Nathaniel Landau has led [research](#) suggesting that Omicron BA.2 is even better than BA.1 at evading [monoclonal antibody drugs](#) developed to fight Covid-19. Nonetheless, he said a new Greek letter wouldn't be needed unless BA.2 turned out to be more harmful to humans.

"If it were to turn out that it has higher pathogenicity, that would then be a reason. But at this point, no," he said.

Prof. Sato said the current co-circulation of BA.1 and BA.2 could spawn a hybrid virus that would "more easily increase and be more harmful."

Scientists said the public-health measures to deal with Omicron were generally the same regardless of its type—vaccination, booster shots, social distancing, masks, good ventilation and so on.

The question is whether the spread of the even more infectious Omicron type should affect the loosening of restrictions. Denmark lifted all restrictions on Feb. 1, only to see a rise in deaths in people infected with Covid-19. Officials said the virus wasn't the cause of some of the deaths.

WHO officials said the threat of BA.2 was a reason for caution. In Japan, where BA.2 has recently been detected, the head of the country's doctors association, Toshio Nakagawa, said the country should keep restrictions such as encouraging restaurants to close early. "Infections might increase again, depending on how BA.2 spreads from now on," Dr. Nakagawa said.

Some governments say that with the public weary after two years of Covid-19, it is time to open up. They observe that the population in many countries has built up considerable immunity to SARS-CoV-2 through multiple vaccination rounds, previous infection or both.

The U.K. is [ending all restrictions](#) starting Thursday, including a legal requirement to self-isolate for those who test positive. "It is a day when all the efforts of the last two years finally enable us to protect ourselves while restoring our liberties," Prime Minister [Boris Johnson](#) said.

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HEADLINE	02/23 Superpower struggle: US, Russia, China
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/ukraine-crisis-kicks-off-new-superpower-struggle-among-u-s-russia-and-china-11645629753?mod=hp_trending_now_article_pos5
GIST	<p>Russia's audacious military assault on Ukraine is the first major clash marking a new order in international politics, with three major powers jostling for position in ways that threaten America's primacy.</p> <p>The challenges are different than those the U.S. and its network of alliances faced in the Cold War. Russia and China have built a thriving partnership based in part on a shared interest in diminishing U.S. power. Unlike the Sino-Soviet bloc of the 1950s, Russia is a critical gas supplier to Europe, while China isn't an impoverished, war-ravaged partner but the world's manufacturing powerhouse with an expanding military.</p>

In deploying a huge force and on Thursday ordering what he called a “special military operation,” Russian President [Vladimir Putin](#) is demanding that the West [rewrite the post-Cold War security arrangements for Europe](#) and demonstrated that Russia has the military capability to impose its will despite Western objections and economic sanctions.

To do this, Mr. Putin shifted military units from Russia’s border with China, showing confidence in his relations with Beijing. The two powers, in effect, are coordinating to reshape the global order to their advantage, though their ties stop short of a formal alliance.

This emerging order leaves the U.S. contending with two adversaries at once in geographically disparate parts of the world where America has close partners and deep economic and political interests. The Biden administration now faces big decisions on whether to regear its priorities, step up military spending, demand allies contribute more, station additional forces abroad and develop more diverse energy sources to reduce Europe’s dependence on Moscow.

“We all thought we were looking at a Europe whole, free and at peace indefinitely,” said Michele Flournoy, who served as the Pentagon’s top policy official during the Obama administration. “We knew that Russia would conduct gray zone operations and that Putin would use his KGB playbook to create instability on his periphery. But a wholesale invasion of a sovereign country to reorient its government is a different moment.”

“And we’re seeing that while Beijing doesn’t really like Putin’s tactics, they’re willing to band together as authoritarian states against the Western democracies,” Ms. Flournoy added. “We are going to see more and more of that in the future.”

The U.S. predicament in part grew out of moves by Washington at the end of the Cold War. As the globe’s sole superpower, the U.S. pushed to promote democracy around the world and expand the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the key Cold War military alliance in Europe, to include former members of the Kremlin-dominated Warsaw Pact and some former Soviet republics. That responded to the decades-old yearnings of East European nations to be free of Moscow’s dominion.

Mr. Putin, however, saw his rivalry with the West as a zero-sum game and set about moving Russia toward its Soviet-era prominence, with greater say over the nations on its periphery.

China’s Communist Party leadership also saw pro-democracy protest movements in former Soviet republics as U.S.-engineered plots that could ultimately be used against Beijing. In response, China’s leadership tightened controls at home while redoubling a military buildup—trends that accelerated when Xi Jinping took charge a decade ago. When pro-democracy protesters rose up in Hong Kong, Mr. Xi imposed harsh security laws, brushing off agreements his predecessors made giving autonomy to the former British colony and international financial center.

For much of the past decade, the U.S. security establishment began taking note of what the Pentagon in 2015 called the “re-emergence of great power competition” and shifted from its emphasis of counterterrorism operations in the Middle East and Southwest Asia.

In setting priorities as the Pentagon seeks to retool for future conflicts, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin has repeatedly cast China as the “pacing challenge” while Russia was seen as the lesser longer-term danger.

The projection matched President Biden’s priorities even as he pledged to buttress the world’s democracies. He took office wanting to focus on the pandemic, the economy and other domestic issues, promising a “middle class” foreign policy that would deliver returns for Americans after costly wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Managing relations with Moscow would help the administration concentrate on the military, economic and technological competition with Beijing.

Toward this end, Mr. Biden held a summit meeting in June with Mr. Putin to forge what the White House called a “stable, predictable” relationship. To put guardrails on relations with Moscow, Mr. Biden agreed to a five-year extension of the New START treaty limiting long-range U.S. and Russian nuclear arms. The White House also directed the Pentagon to explore using Russian bases in Central Asia to prevent the re-emergence of a terrorist threat in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of U.S. troops.

Mr. Putin, however, tried to take advantage of Washington’s focus elsewhere to pursue his agenda of bringing Belarus and Ukraine into Moscow’s sphere of influence, most notably with Russia’s major military buildup on the doorstep of the U.S.’s European allies and its new assault on Ukraine.

Even with annual defense budgets that soared over \$700 billion, coping with an urgent Russian-generated crisis while preparing for a Chinese threat whose peak is still years away presents an enormous challenge for the Pentagon.

“The United States is particularly at risk of being overwhelmed should its military be forced to fight on two or more fronts simultaneously,” said a congressionally mandated study of the Pentagon’s strategy that was issued in 2018 by former military officers and defense officials. One of them, Kathleen Hicks, is now President Biden’s deputy defense secretary directing the agency’s programs and plans.

The crisis is already leading the U.S. to move more troops to Europe and will likely prompt it to rethink defense spending levels and perhaps even the size of its armed forces. The era of nuclear reductions may come to an end as the U.S. military establishment argues for a large enough nuclear arsenal to deter both Russia’s formidable nuclear weaponry and China’s rapidly growing nuclear forces, which aren’t limited by any arms-control agreement.

Having to counter both Russia and China will also lead the Biden administration to lean more heavily on the alliances the U.S. has used to augment its global power. When Messrs. Putin and Xi held a summit in Beijing earlier this month, a 5,300-word statement they released afterward took aim at NATO as well as U.S. alliances with Australia and others in Asia for seeking “unilateral military advantages to the detriment of the security of others.”

China has reinforced military outposts in the South China Sea, a vital global sea lane. It is also constructing a nascent network of bases around the world that could be used by its rapidly expanding navy, piggybacking on port facilities being built as part of its Belt and Road infrastructure initiative. The U.S. is trying to prevent the Chinese navy from gaining its first foothold on the Atlantic, pressuring Equatorial Guinea to spurn Beijing’s advances.

“The United States is going to have to get used again to operating in multiple theaters simultaneously—not just militarily, but in terms of psychology and foreign-policy making,” said Eliot Cohen, a military historian at the Center for Strategic and International Studies think tank.

As the administration tries to sort through the new challenges, the Pentagon has delayed the release of its national defense strategy intended to spell out plans to deter the U.S.’s great power rivals and its new review of what nuclear weapons to develop and the range of threats they should deter. Already, debates are emerging among U.S. defense experts on whether the Pentagon should give equal weight to the twin challenges from Beijing and Moscow or focus more on the Pacific.

Beyond the military, the new confrontation with Moscow might also accelerate a further fracturing of economic globalization. China and the U.S. are trying to unravel supply chains for critical technologies. Should the West impose crippling sanctions on Russian banks and major companies, Moscow is likely to become more reliant on Beijing, which has issued a digital currency and is building a payments system separate from the West’s.

Energy is also likely to become an even greater focal point for national security, owing to Europe’s dependence on supplies of natural gas from Russia, which accounted for 29% of Europe’s natural-gas market last year.

“It is already ending the amnesia about the importance of energy security,” said Daniel Yergin, vice chairman of research firm IHS Markit. “It means a new emphasis on diversification of energy sources for Europe and a new look at U.S. domestic and international energy policies.”

Advocates of using energy as a geopolitical tool say Washington should promote investment in U.S. oil and natural gas and approve new LNG export terminals and pipelines in the U.S.

In Europe, the crisis has already rocked NATO, with its secretary-general, Jens Stoltenberg, saying the alliance needs to reconfigure itself to deal with a “new normal in European security.”

At a security conference in Munich over the weekend, Vice President Kamala Harris and other leaders cited the unity that the U.S. and its European partners have displayed in the face of Russia’s actions.

In the short run, NATO officials say, that may mean sending new battle groups to southeastern Europe and beefing up allied forces in Poland and the Baltic States on NATO’s eastern flank. The 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act precludes the alliance from permanently stationing additional substantial combat forces on the territory of its new Eastern and Central European members, but could now be repealed.

A recent poll by the European Council on Foreign Relations noted most Europeans see the Ukraine crisis as a broader threat to Europe. Some current and former officials, however, worry that the alliance’s solidarity could fray in the years ahead as it debates the need for greater military spending and wrestles whether its military ties with Georgia might stir new confrontations with Moscow.

In June, NATO is planning to adopt its new “strategic concept” at a summit meeting in Madrid, which will outline the broad principles of how the alliance plans to deal with security challenges in the decade ahead. It will come as a report by the Alphen Group by former officials and other experts urges that European members of the alliance and Canada provide for 50% of NATO’s minimum military requirements by 2030 so the U.S. can focus more on deterring China.

“Everybody’s unified right now and outraged about what the Russians are doing,” said Alexander Vershbow, a former U.S. ambassador to NATO who also served as the alliance’s deputy secretary-general from 2012 to 2016. “But when we get down to making longer-term commitments to strengthen NATO’s defense posture and potentially revisit nuclear issues, it could become very divisive.”

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HEADLINE	02/23 Schools between parents, health authorities
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/masks-in-schools-districts-get-caught-between-health-authorities-and-parent-pushback-11645612200?mod=hp_listb_pos1
GIST	<p>Schools have once again become a battleground over pandemic masking, with districts facing rising public pressure to drop mandatory mask requirements even as public-health agencies largely advise keeping students and teachers in face coverings.</p> <p>As the latest Covid-19 wave wanes, more states are lifting mask mandates for restaurants and businesses, but many school requirements remain. Disagreements are leading to heated school board meetings and divided communities, just months after similar tensions flared up during the return to in-person learning in the fall.</p> <p>This time around, districts are balancing how best to stave off outbreaks, and the disruptions they cause, while acknowledging the sustained easing of Covid-19 infections across the country and a desire to return to normalcy.</p> <p>It is a stress that Trent Bowers, superintendent of Worthington school district in the Columbus, Ohio, suburbs, knows well.</p>

On a typical day lately, he said, his inbox fills with a hundred messages from parents telling him to drop the masking requirement in his 10,700-student district. Another few dozen emails say the district is doing the right thing and keeping kids safe.

His local health agency, Columbus Public Health, advises keeping the masks. Meanwhile, surrounding districts are dropping mask requirements, turning Worthington into a masking island.

Mr. Bowers said people constantly tell him he needs to be a leader, but, “that’s defined as doing what they want you to do.”

Worthington’s school board, which has the final say, met Wednesday evening to weigh changing the mask rules by month’s end.

At a meeting earlier this month, the school board reiterated its support for masks, despite rising calls for parental choice.

“I believe we cannot succumb to peer pressure or political pressure,” Charlie Wilson, the board’s vice president, said at the Feb. 14 meeting, as hecklers tried to shout over him.

Other board members said during the meeting that they know families want to see an end date to masking and that schools are constantly fighting with students to keep masks on, but that they wouldn’t simply follow neighboring districts. Instead, they said, local infection rates and the latest scientific guidelines will influence the decision.

The district reported 34 new staff and student Covid-19 cases last week, down from 383 new cases during the first week of the year. Among those eligible, 81% of the Worthington community is fully vaccinated.

“Personal choice dangerously impacts too many,” Jessica Haglund, a parent and special-education advocate, said during the board meeting. She was one of six parents urging the board to keep the mask requirement.

Five others spoke in opposition to a mandate, including one who said her son had stopped wearing glasses he needed to read because masks fogged them up, and another who said public-health agencies are too political.

[Children are at lower risk](#) of severe illness or death from Covid-19, which scientists now believe is because kids better mobilize a first line of immune defense. Even so, many schools view mask mandates as essential to protecting teachers, staff and students’ family members. Those arguing to drop the mandates say masks harm student-teacher interactions, stifle language development and cause anxiety among some students.

“Whenever we have a decision to make, about 50% will be happy and 50% will be frustrated,” Mr. Bowers said of his community, made up of many university teachers, lawyers, bankers and other working professionals.

Mysheika Roberts, the commissioner of Columbus Public Health, speaks with Mr. Bowers and other local superintendents every week to update them on Covid-19 numbers and recommendations. Dr. Roberts said district leaders have told her they wished she could order them to implement a mask mandate to help abate parent anger, but the state legislature stripped local health departments from doing much more than issuing guidance.

Columbus’s Franklin County reported a seven-day rate of 163 Covid-19 cases per 100,000 residents, considered high under Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines. Dr. Roberts said she would like the number to fall to less than 50 per 100,000 before she will consider recommending that schools remove mask mandates.

“If we feel education is essential, which I believe it is, we need to put all our tools in place so kids can remain in the classroom,” Dr. Roberts said.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, the federal government’s top infectious-disease official, said publicly last week that removing masks in schools right now is risky, though he said he understood “why people want to take masks off the kids.”

A CBS News poll earlier this month found 57% of parents of school-age children thought masks should be required in schools, with 36% wanting them optional and 7% preferring masks banned.

Parents in Illinois earlier this month flew an airplane overhead with a banner saying “Unmask our kids!!!” during an anti-mask-mandate protest there. In Oregon, students in several high schools stormed schools unmasked in early February.

Around the country, states have gone in opposite directions on school mask requirements. In California, New York, Hawaii and a few other states, masks have been required this school year. Los Angeles Unified School District, the nation’s second-largest district, requires a surgical mask or KN95-type mask for all students or staff when indoors.

A few states, including Florida and Texas, ban any district from requiring masking. Virginia’s legislature is weighing such a law.

Much of the country has left it to local county or school district discretion.

February has seen a wave of moves away from mask mandates at the state level, including for schools. New Jersey, Washington, Oregon and Massachusetts have all set dates for when mask wearing won’t be required in schools, though districts can still set their own rules.

In Nevada, all districts have now made masks optional following a Feb. 10 decision by Gov. Steve Sisolak, a Democrat, to lift the state’s mandate.

In Clark County School District, home to Las Vegas, Superintendent Jesus Jara said the district “happily and eagerly” fell in line with dropping its mask requirement that same day. He called the change a relief for families, and said some in the 305,000-student district are still choosing to wear masks. “Allowing parents and kids to have their own individual choice was important,” Mr. Jara said.

In Worthington, Mr. Bowers thinks back on the challenges of the past two years, including times when parents wanting even more pandemic restrictions picketed outside his office, calling for his ouster.

“We’re in this heat of the moment that is very difficult,” he said of the decision to drop the mask mandate. “People on both sides are good people that want what’s best for kids. But they have a different view on what that is.”

After an hourlong discussion Wednesday night, the Worthington school board voted 4-1 to make mask wearing “strongly encouraged” but not required starting Monday.

Board members cited falling infection rates and a need to free teachers from the responsibility of enforcing mask wearing. Mr. Bowers said whether or not he personally believed it was the right decision, it was time to “remove what’s becoming an ongoing conflict from our school district.”

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HEADLINE	02/24 China denies backing Russia attack
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/02/24/ukraine-china-russia-invasion-reaction/
GIST	China on Thursday denied backing Russia’s military assault in Ukraine as it treaded a cautious line in response to a conflict that many Chinese analysts just days before were predicting wouldn’t happen.

At a regular briefing, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying downplayed the suggestion that Beijing was supporting Moscow behind the scenes.

“As for American hints that Russia had China backing it up, I’m sure Russia would be pleased to hear it,” Hua said. “We won’t be like America and provide Ukraine a large amount of military equipment. Russia as a powerful nation also does not need China or other countries to provide [military assistance].”

Hua added that “China did not wish to see what happened in Ukraine today.”

The Russian attacks are the greatest test yet for an [emerging Moscow-Beijing axis](#), which has recently shown signs of evolving from what many considered a “marriage of convenience” to something resembling a formal alliance.

In recent weeks, China has voiced support for Russia’s “legitimate security concerns” but has balanced that with calls for restraint and negotiations, echoing the approach China took during the 2014 invasion of Crimea. Beijing appeared to be repeating that tightrope walk on Thursday, as it called for calm while news of the attacks sent regional markets plunging.

Despite the outward show of mutual support between the two countries, there have been indications that China was caught flat footed by Russian President Vladimir Putin’s announcement of military action.

Minutes after the declaration, Chinese representative to the United Nations Zhang Jun was telling a Security Council meeting: “we believe that the door to a peaceful solution to the Ukraine situation is not fully shut, nor should it be.”

Yun Sun, Director of the China Program at the Stimson Center, noted Tuesday that the Chinese policy community appeared to be in “shock” at the sudden escalation of fighting after having “subscribed to the theory that Putin was only posturing and that U.S. intelligence was inaccurate as in the case of invading Iraq.”

For instance in an interview on Tuesday, Ma Bin, a Russia expert at Fudan University in Shanghai, told Chinese publication Yicai that the ball was in Ukraine’s court and “there would not be a war” because Russia still preferred a diplomatic resolution.

That same day, when China warned its nationals in Ukraine about a worsening situation, it did not tell them to leave the country. On Thursday, with explosions going off nearby, many of the 8,000-odd Chinese passport holders in the country took to microblog Weibo to call for help.

“When can China evacuate?” asked a user with the handle LumpyCut. “We are in Kyiv near the airport. I just heard three enormous bombings and can estimate the size of the mushroom clouds by sight.”

The Chinese Embassy responded to the outcry with a statement urging everyone to stay put and not to panic as well as suggesting that anyone traveling long distances by car place a Chinese flag in an obvious place on the vehicle’s body. It did not mention evacuation plans.

In recent weeks, Chinese experts have argued that de-escalation was possible even as they adopted Russia’s view of the conflict. Wang Yiwei, director of the Center for European Studies at Renmin University, wrote in late January that only the actions of Ukraine or the United States could bring about a war, but because the former lacked “gall” and the latter lacked strength for a direct conflict with Russia, tensions could be dispelled.

In an interview on Thursday, Wang defended his prediction as being primarily about the possibility of a direct conflict between the United States and Russia, not fighting in eastern Ukraine.

While China always supports the principle of protecting national sovereignty, “there are some countries that are being used by external forces as a tool to harm the territorial integrity of other nations,” he said. “Lots of people in China say that Ukraine did not manage the balance between powers and that passive approach led to Russia taking this extreme measure.”

In the run up to Putin’s announcement, China continued to blame the United States and NATO for being instigators of the conflict, brushing aside warnings from the White House about the Kremlin’s intention to invade.

“A key question here is what role the U.S., the culprit of current tensions surrounding Ukraine, has played,” Hua, the Foreign Ministry spokesperson, said on Wednesday. “If someone keeps pouring oil on the flame while accusing others of not doing their best to put out the fire, such kind of behavior is clearly irresponsible and immoral.”

Hua also rejected suggestions that China might adhere to U.S.-led sanctions against Russia, pointing to China’s long-held stance against the use of sanctions adopted outside of United Nations deliberations.

China’s support for Russia has also stopped short of direct approval for Russian military action. Over the weekend, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi reiterated that all countries sovereignty must be respected, adding that “Ukraine is not an exception.”

Such hesitation comes, however, during a time of growing strategic alignment between Moscow and Beijing, built primarily on shared disdain for the United States and the Western-led world order.

Hawkish commentators in China were quick to explain Putin’s attack on Thursday as the result of provocation from the United States. “That the situation came to today’s step is due to spiraling escalation,” Fu Qianshao, a military commentator, told nationalist publication the Shanghai Observer. “Russia had already said many times that it would withdraw troops, but America always promoted an atmosphere of conflict.”

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HEADLINE	02/23 America: land of the bulging bank accounts
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2022/02/23/savings-bank-accounts-covid/
GIST	<p>Most Americans are significantly better off financially now than they were before the pandemic began, new bank-account data shows, but there are signs that low-income families are beginning to fall behind.</p> <p>Following surprisingly strong retail sales, consumer expectations and hiring numbers, new savings data through December 2021 from the JPMorgan Chase Institute points to a rapidly thawing economy, one that could shift into even higher gear as the omicron-fueled covid-19 wave subsides and states continue to ease some covid restrictions.</p> <p>Americans are sitting on \$2.6 trillion in extra savings, a separate Post analysis shows, and signs abound that they are opening up their wallets on long-delayed spending on travel, dining and other experiences that have been on hold since lockdowns swept the country almost two years ago.</p> <p>High earners will drive much of that aggregate spending, said Fiona Greig, co-president of the JPMC Institute. They have an average of almost \$1,300 more in their bank accounts than before the pandemic began, according to the institute’s analysis of anonymized bank-account data for 7.5 million families. Families’ retirement accounts and home equity also have soared.</p> <p>For low-income families, the picture is mixed. They saw the largest proportional increase, as their balances are up about 70 percent from 2019 levels. But in the past three months, the balances of lower earners fell slightly, to an average of \$1,288, in contrast with higher earners, whose balances kept gaining.</p>

“Seventy percent elevated sounds really high, but in terms of dollar values, it’s not a ton of cash,” Greig said.

But for now, even low-income households still have a substantial savings from their stimulus and unemployment checks, [data shows](#), and a [widely watched survey](#) points to the sunniest consumer outlook going back to 2013.

Indeed, across the income spectrum, income and spending growth expectations have reached record highs, and the average probability of a missed loan payment is near record lows, said Gizem Kosar, an economist on the New York Fed’s Survey of Consumer Expectations team.

To be sure, a spending spree could throw more fuel on an already hot economy and worsen the nation’s biggest surge of inflation in four decades. Conflict in the Ukraine is already [threatening to push up fuel prices](#), and raising the risk of cyberattacks that could newly snarl supply chains, said Diane Swonk, chief economist at Grant Thornton. If those disruptions coincide with a rush of spending on dining, travel and automobiles, policymakers could find themselves faced with a situation not seen since the 1970s.

Yet, there is potential for a substantial spending boom. Despite soaring inflation and multiple waves of covid-19, crisis-era stimulus that added an estimated \$1.7 trillion to U.S. incomes left many families on strong financial footing at the end of 2021.

American savings peaked in late March, after \$1,400 checks from the American Rescue Plan hit bank accounts nationwide. The account of the typical family has fallen between \$700 and \$900 in the months since, which still leaves most families at least \$500 ahead, compared to precrisis levels.

In percentage terms, though, higher-income families are down less than 10 percent from their stimulus peak, while lower-income families are down almost 30 percent and have fallen farther behind in recent months. And research shows [inflation has hit low-income families far harder](#) than it has their high-income peers.

[Rent inflation](#), in particular, “completely erodes the purchasing power of the extra few hundred dollars households may have in their bank accounts,” said Camelia Kuhnen, a University of North Carolina economist who researches household financial behaviors. This financial squeeze makes it harder to pay the bills, even if bank balances appear healthy.

“I wish things were different, and I wish I could say that nowadays lower-income families face less financial fragility than before covid, but the reality is, they are worse off,” Kuhnen said.

That helps explain why the share of households that expect to be either “somewhat” or “much” better off in the coming year has hit its [lowest level on record](#), according to New York Fed data.

The share of households behind on their bills remains exceptionally low, a [separate New York Fed report shows](#), but as federal stimulus runs out and loans come out of forbearance, some households will be looking at a different financial landscape.

“The circumstances are changing. There is no sign that there’s going to be another round of stimulus,” the JPMC Institute’s Greig said, adding that child tax credit payments have ended and student loan payments are expected to resume in May. “Families will no longer be receiving the government support that boosted their incomes in 2020 and 2021,” she said.

The JPMC Institute data also showed families that received monthly child tax credit payments fared substantially better financially in the latter half of 2021 than families that did not get them. The last wave of payments went out in mid December. The institute does not yet have data on what happened to these families once that lifeline expired, but a separate analysis found that [child poverty soared in January compared to December](#).

To further complicate matters, inflation means savings won't go as far as they once did. Prices are up 8.9 percent since the pandemic began. But so far, higher prices have not deterred consumers.

While omicron caused a brief slowdown, consumer-focused businesses ranging from Starbucks to Lyft are bracing for what they say could be a massive spending surge. "There is a pent-up demand for Starbucks and for people wanting and longing to return to their normalized routine," said John Culver, the coffee chain's chief operating officer, on a recent earnings call.

"The thing that we've seen time and time again through the multiple stages of the pandemic is that every time the brand actually comes back a little bit stronger than before," Cheesecake Factory chief financial officer Matthew Clark said on another earnings call.

At Lyft, CFO Elaine Paul, said the company had seen a similar pattern. Throughout the pandemic, demand for getting out and about has built up as cases rise, and it has been unleashed when the economy opens up again.

"As people can go out safely and have more places to go, whether to bars, restaurants, sporting events or concerts, that's exactly what they do," Paul said on a recent earnings call.

Some of that extra savings, however, may not be spent anytime soon. Many say consumers are keeping more in the bank as insurance against rising uncertainty. In St. Albans City, Vt., John DeMarinis, 68, owns Boston Tailoring, a dry-cleaning and alterations business that has been in his family for more than a century, [but like a lot of dry cleaners](#), he's seen business dry up during the pandemic.

DeMarinis said that while people aren't short on cash, he believes the chaos caused by the global pandemic has caused many to be more careful with their spending.

"I think they have money, you know what I mean? The government stimulus money and the money they were given for the kids' supplements — I think they helped out people a lot, and I think people financially are probably better off now than they were before the pandemic," he said. But "they're being a little bit more cautious with what they're spending money on."

Economists agree that between the pandemic and inflation, even the most optimistic Americans are likely to keep extra cash in their savings account to cover unexpected crises.

"We don't know what the year is going to bring," Greig said. "We don't know if there's going to be a fourth surge or there's going to be a new variant. And so the idea that some families are stockpiling and saving for a rainy day just feels pretty rational at this point."

A typical stimulus payment, such as those during the Great Recession, is intended to goose consumer spending and stimulate the economy. The first pandemic stimulus was unusual, said Jonathan Parker, an economist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, because spending opportunities were limited when checks went out.

"When they sent out checks in April, everyone was worried about the pandemic. They had stopped going out to eat. They were sitting around at home, streaming television," Parker said. "They're not going to spend that money, there's not much for them to spend on. They had less expenses, so they were already saving more than they used to save."

This helps explain why people were much slower to spend their government checks during the pandemic than they were during similar programs in 2001 and 2008, according to a [new analysis](#) from Parker and his co-authors, Bureau of Labor Statistics economists Laura Erhard and Jake Schild, and University of Michigan economist David Johnson.

To accurately measure savings, the JPMC Institute data only includes those with bank accounts and income (of at least \$12,000 a year) during the past three years. That sample leaves out many of the people

	<p>who needed the stimulus most and who, according to Parker’s research, were mostly likely to rapidly spend the payments as they arrived. That population may still be struggling, but it won’t be reflected in today’s data.</p> <p>“We had a social safety net with holes,” Parker said, “By sending out money really broadly, we would be sure to reach those people who might otherwise risk falling off into very bad times as we shut the economy down to control the virus.”</p>
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HEADLINE	02/23 Military response to Russia attack Ukraine
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/02/23/us-military-pentagon-ukraine-russia/
GIST	<p>The Pentagon detailed a new round of deployments to Eastern Europe on Tuesday in response to Russia’s latest actions against Ukraine, sending fighter jets, attack helicopters and infantry troops as it bolsters security in the region.</p> <p>The deployments were announced as President Biden also disclosed new sanctions aimed at punishing Russia, and they come on the heels of other similar moves by the Pentagon as the crisis has escalated. No U.S. troops will fight in Ukraine, Biden has said, but the crisis has prompted waves of American deployments from both the United States and U.S. installations in Europe.</p> <p>“These additional personnel are being repositioned to reassure our NATO allies, deter any potential aggression against NATO member states, and train with host-nation forces,” the Pentagon said in a statement. “They will report to General Tod Wolters, Commander, U.S. European Command.”</p> <p>Why is the U.S. willing to deploy troops in Eastern Europe but not in Ukraine? In short: Obligations.</p> <p>In the aftermath of World War II, the United States, Canada and several allies in Western Europe established the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to provide collective security against the Soviet Union. Among the alliance’s founding principals is that an attack on one NATO country is considered an attack on all, obligating NATO nations by treaty to stick together in a time of crisis.</p> <p>NATO has expanded for years, from 12 nations in 1949 to 30 today, and has grown to include former Soviet republics such as Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania. That has riled Russian President Vladimir Putin. Other former Soviet states, notably Ukraine and Georgia, have sought membership, but their applications have languished in part because allowing them to join would require the rest of NATO to defend them against Russia.</p> <p>Putin has sought guarantees that Ukraine will not break free from his sphere of influence more fully by joining NATO, and he has complained bitterly about NATO expansion. Resolution of the crisis now will likely require addressing the issue in some fashion.</p> <p>How many U.S. troops are deployed in Europe and why? Even in peacetime, the Pentagon’s presence across Europe is vast — a legacy, in part, of World War II. More than 90,000 U.S. troops are on the continent or sailing near it, with about 35,000 based in Germany alone.</p> <p>The military relationships across the continent are driven in part by deals established in the liberal world order, a framework established after World War II that sought to prioritize peace, democracy and the rule of law across the globe, as well as counter the Soviet Union in the Cold War.</p> <p>While the framework has required significant defense spending and deployments on the part of the United States, it also has provided U.S. bases in the region that have proven invaluable. One example: The majority of U.S. troops requiring emergency surgery after suffering injuries in Iraq or Afghanistan received treatment at a U.S. Army hospital in Landstuhl, Germany.</p>

Other major U.S. troop concentrations in Europe are based in Italy, Britain and Spain. The United States has maintained close military ties with other nations, including some, such as Poland, that are close to Ukraine.

What has the Army done in recent days?

Among the first steps the U.S. military took was [deploying several thousand soldiers](#) with the 82nd Airborne Division at Fort Bragg, N.C., to Poland.

The soldiers did not deploy with tanks or other heavy weapons that would be needed to take on Russia in Ukraine. But they are a visible symbol of American presence, including near Przemysl, a Polish city just a few miles from the Ukrainian border.

Pentagon spokesman John Kirby has said the soldiers will not deploy inside Ukraine but could have a wide range of missions just across the border, including providing humanitarian assistance if waves of refugees fleeing bloodshed arrive.

The Pentagon also deployed a unit of about 1,000 soldiers operating Stryker armored combat vehicles this month from Germany to Romania, where they joined about 900 U.S. troops who already were there. A smaller company of soldiers, numbering more than 100, was deployed to Bulgaria.

The moves announced by the Pentagon on Tuesday escalate the kinds of weaponry arriving in the area. Among the soldiers involved are pilots flying AH-64 Apache gunship helicopters and their support crews, and about 800 paratroopers with the 173rd Airborne Brigade, who are based in Vicenza, Italy.

How are the other services involved?

While the bulk of U.S. military deployments announced so far in the crisis have been from the Army, each service in the Defense Department already is involved.

Notably, the Navy has kept the Harry S. Truman carrier strike group — a powerful formation of ships that includes an aircraft carrier named after the former president — in the region for weeks. As of Monday, the strike group was in the Ionian Sea, off the coasts of Greece and Italy, participating in a NATO training exercise that includes ships, aircraft and submarines, according to Navy statements.

The Navy also has been flying P-8A Poseidon surveillance planes — which specialize in hunting submarines — from Italy over the Mediterranean Sea. Russian fighter jets have intercepted them, in some cases at distances that the Pentagon identified as unsafe and unprofessional.

On Tuesday, the Pentagon said that up to eight Air Force F-35 fighter jets will deploy to Eastern Europe as part of expanding operations, adding the military's most advanced aircraft to the puzzle. Other fighter jets and surveillance planes have been spotted flying over the region for days, and military officials have highlighted flights by a B-52 bomber task force that landed in the Czech Republic on Monday.

The Marine Corps' role in the crisis has been more limited so far, but it includes a team of embassy security guards who were based in Kyiv, the Ukrainian capital, until the United States withdrew from the diplomatic compound last week. The United States had dispatched eight additional embassy guards to Kyiv to bolster security there before pulling out, Marine officials told reporters last month.

What might NATO do?

U.S. troops deployed in the crisis so far report to U.S. European Command, the geographic headquarters in Stuttgart, Germany, that oversees American operations across the continent. But NATO allies have increasingly stepped forward, too, sending weapons to Ukraine and troops to bolster forces in Eastern Europe.

	<p>There's another major step that NATO can take, however. The alliance has at its disposal a multinational unit called the NATO Response Force that numbers about 40,000 troops. NATO has never activated the force, in part because doing so requires the consent of all 30 members of the alliance.</p> <p>Since Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula and subsequent annexation of it, NATO has taken several other steps to bolster security. They include establishing a multinational brigade in Romania, an air policing mission, and a Very High Readiness Task Force, or VJTF, that is on alert to deploy at a moment's notice.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/23 Biden vows to 'hold Russia accountable'
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/23/world/europe/biden-sanctions-russia.html
GIST	<p>President Biden said the world would "hold Russia accountable" as explosions were seen in Ukraine's second-largest city minutes after Russian President Vladimir V. Putin declared the start of a "special military operation" in the country.</p> <p>"President Putin has chosen a premeditated war that will bring a catastrophic loss of life and human suffering," Mr. Biden said in a statement on Wednesday night. "Russia alone is responsible for the death and destruction this attack will bring, and the United States and its allies and partners will respond in a united and decisive way."</p> <p>Mr. Biden said he was monitoring the events from the White House on Wednesday night and receiving updates from his national security team. The president said he would meet with Group of 7 leaders on Thursday and would then address the American people, when he planned "to announce the further consequences the United States and our allies and partners will impose on Russia for this needless act of aggression against Ukraine and global peace and security." Mr. Biden's speech is scheduled for Thursday afternoon, according to a White House official.</p> <p>Mr. Biden's penalties against Russia for its actions in Ukraine have included imposing economic sanctions against two Russian banks and the company behind an energy pipeline connecting Russia to Germany. They also include measures aimed at hurting several members of the Russian elite and prohibiting Russia from trading debt in American or European markets.</p> <p>Mr. Biden and his top aides, who warned that Mr. Putin intended to invade Ukraine, said they hoped the countermeasures by the United States would both deter Mr. Putin and allow the Biden administration to add more sweeping sanctions if he escalated the conflict.</p> <p>Mr. Putin's declaration set off a rare moment of bipartisan ire in Congress as lawmakers in both parties furiously denounced the invasion as a premeditated attack and called on Mr. Biden to swiftly enact new, debilitating sanctions on Russia.</p> <p>"Every option must be placed on the table to stop Putin's malevolence that not only threatens Ukraine and Eastern Europe, but the security of all liberal democracies around the globe," said Senator Jeanne Shaheen, Democrat of New Hampshire. "Putin chose a path to war, and he must now suffer the consequences."</p> <p>Senator Jim Risch of Idaho, the top Republican on the Foreign Relations Committee, had pressed the Biden administration for weeks to enact a sweeping array of sanctions on Moscow, on activities including the Russian gas pipeline. He warned that the repercussions Mr. Putin would face would be "painful and swift."</p> <p>The House and the Senate are out of session, with lawmakers working from their districts across the country, but senators are expected to receive a briefing on the situation from the Biden administration on Thursday afternoon. And even outside of Washington, before the invasion, a bipartisan group of senators had been working to reach agreement on a new set of sanctions targeting Moscow.</p>

	<p>“For more than 70 years, we have avoided large-scale war in Europe,” said Senator Mark Warner, Democrat of Virginia, the chairman of the Intelligence Committee. “With his illegal invasion of Ukraine, Vladimir Putin has tragically brought decades of general peace to an end.”</p>
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HEADLINE	02/23 Study: guns leading cause trauma death
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/feb/23/gun-deaths-overtook-car-crashes-as-leading-cause-o/
GIST	<p>Gun deaths have overtaken car crashes as the leading cause of trauma death in the U.S., according to new research that found firearm suicides among older White men are a driving factor.</p> <p>Researchers at the Westchester Medical Center in New York pulled data from 2009 to 2018 and found gun deaths rose 0.72% per year over that period while car crashes fell 0.07% yearly, resulting in firearm deaths surpassing crashes in 2017.</p> <p>An estimated 1.4 million years of potential life were lost due to gun deaths in 2017 compared to 1.37 million years due to car crashes. The trend continued into 2018 with the years of potential life lost due to firearms exceeding those due to car crashes by more than 38,000.</p> <p>Firearm suicides surged from more than 18,700 in 2009 to more than 24,400 in 2018, and firearm homicides rose from about 11,500 to nearly 14,000 over the same period.</p> <p>Males accounted for 85% of firearm deaths during the study period, according to a report this week in the medical journal Trauma Surgery & Acute Care Open.</p> <p>Suicide among White males accounted for just under half, or 49.3%, of firearm deaths in 2018, with middle-aged and older men particularly impacted, while gun homicides among Black men accounted for 18% of gun deaths.</p> <p>White males lost 4.95 million years of potential life due to firearm suicide compared with 1.7 million years because of firearm suicide.</p> <p>Black males suffered from the inverse situation, losing 3.2 million years of potential life due to gun homicides compared to 0.4 million due to suicide.</p> <p>Concerns about gun crime and so-called deaths from despair, including suicide, have continued since the end of the period detailed in the new report — fueled in part by the opioid epidemic and COVID-19 pandemic that increased social isolation.</p> <p>The Gun Archive, an online record of gun violence tallied from law, media, government and commercial sources, reports there were 39,568 gun deaths in 2019; 43,651 in 2020 and 44,912 in 2021.</p> <p>More than 1,000 Americans were wounded or killed in shootings in a notoriously bad week last July, with 109 in Illinois — particularly in Chicago — and 63 in Texas, according to a Daily Mail review of archive data.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/23 Russia warns US: response will be painful
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/feb/23/russia-warns-response-us-sanctions-will-be-painful/
GIST	<p>Russia clapped back Wednesday at the United States, warning that its response to sanctions imposed by President Biden will be “finely tuned and painful.”</p> <p>“There should be no doubt that sanctions will receive a strong response, not necessarily symmetrical, but finely tuned and painful to the American side,” the Russian Foreign Ministry said in a statement.</p>

	<p>The statement was issued in response to a new package of sanctions the U.S. imposed Tuesday against Russia, cutting off its government from Western financing and punishing elites with ties to the Kremlin.</p> <p>The tranche of sanctions was slapped against two major Russian banks, the country's sovereign debt and a handful of elites and their family members.</p> <p>Mr. Biden ordered the penalties after Russia formally recognized two separatist regions in Ukraine, which are controlled by Moscow-backed forces.</p> <p>In its statement, Russia's Foreign Ministry said the penalties will not deter Moscow from reversing course.</p> <p>"Russia has proved that, despite all the sanctions costs, it is able to minimize the damage. And even more so, sanctions pressure is not able to affect our determination to firmly defend our interests," the statement reads.</p> <p>Despite its rhetoric, the statement expressed that it is open to diplomacy to resolve the crisis in Ukraine.</p> <p>"We are open to diplomacy based on the principles of mutual respect, equality, and consideration of each other's interests," the statement reads.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/23 US widens the slate of sanctions on Russia
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/feb/23/biden-imposes-new-sanctions-threat-full-scale-russ/
GIST	<p>President Biden widened the slate of U.S. sanctions against Russia in response to military moves on Ukraine on Wednesday, but it was not enough to prevent Russian President Vladimir Putin from ordering a major escalation of his war against Ukraine.</p> <p>The U.S. sanctions, announced just hours before Mr. Putin said in a nationally televised address he was launching a "special military operation" against Kyiv, targeted the Nord Stream 2 Russia-to-Germany pipeline and could carry far-reaching implications for European and global energy markets.</p> <p>Mr. Biden and Western leaders are expected to announce an even broader and more punishing array of sanctions Thursday, as Russian forces appear to be breaking out of the pro-Russian separatist enclaves on Ukraine's far eastern border and have begun operations against Ukrainian government forces in the Greater Donbas region. Loud explosions could also be heard near the capital of Kyiv, the major city of Kharkhiv and other locations.</p> <p>At an emergency U.N. Security Council meeting sought by Ukraine late Wednesday evening, U.S. U.N. Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield said Mr. Putin's declaration put the lie to repeated Russian assurances over recent weeks that no military action was in the works and that Moscow was still seeking a diplomatic end to the crisis.</p> <p>"Russia's attack on Ukraine is tantamount to an attack on the U.N. and every member state in the chamber tonight," she said.</p> <p>Before the military operations launched in the early morning hours in Ukraine Thursday, a senior Defense Department official told The Washington Times on the condition of anonymity that Russia has in place nearly all of the combat power it needs to move deep into Ukraine, well beyond the two breakaway regions Russian forces have entered that were controlled by Moscow-backed separatists.</p> <p>With Russia having massed some 190,000 troops on Ukraine's border, the official said roughly 80% of necessary units were ready to go forward and were positioned as close as 3 miles from the border. U.S. officials assessed that the Russian forces included more than 120 battalion tactical groups, dozens of battleships, jet fighters and ballistic weapons.</p>

Ukraine's government declared a nationwide state of emergency and called up 36,000 military reservists. Citizens were advised to avoid traveling to Russia and to flee immediately if already there.

The Kremlin said late Wednesday night that Ukrainian separatists had sent a request for Russian military assistance in the face of "aggression" by the Ukrainian government. The Biden administration quickly called out the claim as propaganda and an attempted "false flag" for Moscow to create a pretext for an invasion.

Nord Stream 2

The flurry of developments threatened to overshadow Mr. Biden's announcement of economic sanctions against Nord Stream 2 AG, as well as against corporate officials of the Swiss company that built the pipeline.

The move followed a tranche of economic sanctions that Mr. Biden imposed Tuesday against two top Russian banks and a collection of Russian elites. The U.S. took the measures after Russian President Vladimir Putin formally recognized the two Moscow-backed regions of eastern Ukraine as independent countries.

"These steps are another piece of our initial tranche of sanctions in response to Russia's actions in Ukraine. As I have made clear, we will not hesitate to take further steps if Russia continues to escalate," Mr. Biden said in a statement announcing the Nord Stream 2 sanctions.

Although the president had signaled that sanctions on Nord Stream 2 were likely, the move was a surprise to some. The administration waived Trump-era sanctions against the company building the pipeline last year.

The sanctions dovetail with German actions Tuesday to halt certification of the Nord Stream 2 project as the Ukraine crisis escalated. Berlin's move was a blow to Mr. Putin's plan to expand Russian control over Europe's energy supply. Russia provides about one-third of the energy European nations use.

Construction of Nord Stream 2 was completed last year, although the pipeline was awaiting certification from German regulators before going online. It was built to deliver more than 50% of natural gas that Germans consume annually and generate as much as \$15 billion to Gazprom, Russia's state-controlled energy corporation.

Moscow appeared unmoved and said Germany was just hurting itself.

Analysts say the Nord Stream 2 sanctions also could backfire on Mr. Biden, given that Russia is one of the top oil exporters to the United States. Although a major economic hit to Moscow's energy operations could cause economic pain for Mr. Putin, it may also impact energy consumers in the U.S. and Europe.

Oil and energy markets strategist Dan Dicker predicted Wednesday that most of the impact is likely to be felt in Europe and in Russia, which is widely regarded as a petroleum-based economy.

"It's very delicate right now with oil prices going up, and it's a political disaster here in the United States for Biden, as it would be for any president," Mr. Dicker said in an interview, although he added that "in Europe, they have an even more critical problem because they're short on energy supplies."

White House press secretary Jen Psaki has said the Biden administration is considering tapping the U.S. Strategic Petroleum Reserve if oil and gas prices rise any further.

Potential Invasion

	<p>Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy told his citizens Tuesday night to fight for their country and that he would “raise the preparedness of the Ukrainian army to all possible changes in the operational situation.”</p> <p>“We need to quickly replenish the Ukrainian army and other military formations,” Mr. Zelenskyy said. “As the supreme commander in chief of the armed forces of Ukraine, I issued a decree on the conscription of reservists in a special period.”</p> <p>He made the comments amid fears that Russia may also carry out cyberattacks as part of its action against Ukraine.</p> <p>Just hours before Mr. Zelenskyy declared a state of emergency, several Ukrainian government websites became inaccessible.</p> <p>Even before Mr. Putin announced the expanded military operation, Mr. Kirby told reporters that U.S. officials believed the Russians were “close to some sort of action” in Ukraine.</p> <p>“Russian forces continue to assemble closer to the border and put themselves in an advanced stage of readiness to act,” Mr. Kirby said.</p> <p>“Virtually any time now,” he said. “We believe they are ready.”</p>
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HEADLINE	02/23 Rush to ditch mask rule widens gulf w/CDC
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/feb/23/rush-states-stores-and-cruise-lines-ditch-mask-rul/
GIST	<p>Every state that had a statewide mask mandate, except Hawaii, either has lifted it or will let it expire in the coming weeks as coronavirus infections fall to levels not seen since November, before the omicron wave.</p> <p>Target stores this week said it won’t require workers or customers to cover their faces unless local regulations require it, while Apple stores said customers in many stores would no longer have to mask up. Norwegian Cruise Line, Carnival Cruise Line and Royal Caribbean are lifting their mask rules over the next two weeks.</p> <p>The dramatic shift leaves the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as an outlier as it lags in updating mask guidance while governors from coast to coast say they are longer mandatory.</p> <p>CDC Director Rochelle Walensky has said the agency will refresh its guidance in the coming days or weeks as it pinpoints the right metrics, such as hospital capacity, to guide the update. For now, the agency says people should wear masks in public indoor spaces in counties with high or substantial transmission, which describes most of the country.</p> <p>“As always, CDC is regularly reviewing our guidance to ensure we are providing science-based recommendations that are most relevant for each moment of the pandemic,” CDC spokeswoman Jade Fulce said Wednesday. “We will communicate any updates on our mask recommendations publicly if and/or when they change.”</p> <p>Still, the disconnect is disorienting for Americans who believe CDC guidance ought to dictate the tone for everyone else.</p> <p>“It is a huge problem for CDC because what states and businesses do should flow from the top experts at CDC, whereas now the guidance amounts to mere background noise. In other words, what’s the point of issuing the guidance if it doesn’t influence policy?” said Arthur Caplan, director of the division of medical ethics at the New York University Grossman School of Medicine.</p>

Instead, state and city policymakers are responding to a mandate-weary public — a trucker protest is threatening to descend on Washington — in shedding masks as daily reported infections average 80,000 per day, a 90% drop from the mid-January peak though still an elevated level compared to many periods of the pandemic.

“The battle against COVID is ending in the USA,” Mr. Caplan said. “Short of another variant, we are not willing to mask to protect the high-risk population. The message is we are done masking and staying home.”

He said that message also amounts to saying the unvaccinated, children under age 5 and ineligible for vaccines, and the immunocompromised are “on their own.”

Masks remain a central feature of the pandemic fight after vaccines did not rein in viral transmission as much as initially hoped.

But mask mandates also become a symbol of government overreach for some critics, especially when it comes to rules on schoolchildren, and the CDC in January recommended higher-grade N95 or KN95 masks after many people spent much of the pandemic relying on cloth masks.

Proponents of masks have pointed to studies that support their position. Counties that adopted a July 2020 mask mandate in Kansas experienced significantly lower rates of COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations, and deaths compared with those that did not, according to one study.

A massive study of 350,000 people in 600 villages in rural Bangladesh last year found those randomly assigned to wear surgical masks were about 11% less likely than those living in control villages to develop COVID-19.

Some people in the U.S. say the rush to ditch face covering is premature.

The Association of Flight Attendants-CWA, a major flight attendants’ union, said the Transportation Security Administration’s plan to lift mask requirements on March 18 instead of extending the rule would imperil medically frail passengers and those under age 5.

A plurality of registered New York voters, 45%, said Gov. Kathy Hochul’s state mask mandate should have remained in place, compared to 31% who say it should have ended earlier than Feb. 10 and 20% who say it ended at the right time, according to a new Siena College poll.

A majority, 58%, think New York should wait until it sees early March virus data before lifting a mask mandate on schools.

New York was part of a cluster of blue states, from California to New England, that lifted mask mandates immediately or said they would go away at the beginning of March.

Hawaii Gov. David Ige, the Democratic leader of the last holdout state, told TV station KITV last week he is working with health officials to determine when it is appropriate to lift an indoor mask mandate.

Cases on the island state have plummeted in line with national rates, averaging 325 per day from 5,000 during the January peak.

He said Hawaii has one of the lowest COVID-19 death rates in the nation “in part because of the indoor mask requirement and other measures that have proven successful in protecting our community from this potentially deadly virus.

“We base our decisions on science, with the health and safety of our community as the top priority,” he said.

Return to Top	<p>Some places have a patchwork of rules.</p> <p>New York City, for instance, has stringent vaccine requirements at many sites but mask policies are largely set by businesses. People must cover their faces at Broadway shows, in hospitals and medical centers, however.</p> <p>New York City Mayor Eric Adams is pushing for a broader revival of activity to get the city out of the pandemic doldrums.</p> <p>He said Wednesday that while he understands that the virus has changed society, foot traffic is necessary for the city's economic survival, particularly for lower-wage workers.</p> <p>"We have to have human interaction, it can't be done from home," Mr. Adams said. "You can't stay home in your pajamas all day. That is not who we are as a city. You need to be out cross-pollinating ideas, interacting with humans. It is crucial, we're social creatures and we must socialize to get the energy we need as a city."</p>
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HEADLINE	02/23 DC officials brace for wave of truckers
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/feb/23/dc-officials-brace-wave-truckers-en-route-city/
GIST	<p>Law enforcement officials are bracing for a wave of Washington-bound truckers inspired by Canada's Freedom Convoy slated to arrive in the region over the coming weeks.</p> <p>The Metropolitan Police Department (MPD) said Wednesday that it has stepped up resources in the District and has activated Civil Disturbance Units in preparation for the protests.</p> <p>"As with all First Amendment demonstrations, MPD will be monitoring, assessing, and planning accordingly with our local, state, and federal partners," the department said in a statement.</p> <p>The city also will have 700 National Guard troops on hand for the trucker protests, which some fear could ensnare the city ahead of President Biden's State of the Union address on March 1.</p> <p>Scranton, Pennsylvania,-based trucker Bob Bolus said earlier this week that he aimed to shut down the Capital Beltway, but tempered expectations Wednesday as he neared Washington with just one big rig and a few supporters in tow.</p> <p>"We're just the spearhead of this whole thing," Mr. Bolus told The Washington Times. "We're giving the government the opportunity to understand who the hell we are and what we're about."</p> <p>He said that although he no longer planned on bringing traffic to a halt, he said his trek should serve as a warning for government leaders.</p> <p>A separate group known as the People's Convoy began an 11-day trek from California backed by \$464,000 in donations. Several other groups organized under the American Truckers Freedom Fund are expected to begin making their way to the Capital region in early March and stage a rally outside Washington.</p> <p>Organizers behind the Peoples' Convoy also say they have no intention of disrupting traffic.</p> <p>Officials' fears remain piqued after the three-week demonstration that roiled Canada after a group of truckers took to the streets of Ottawa to protest vaccine mandates for truckers.</p> <p>The movement, known as the Freedom Convoy, eventually morphed into a nationwide protest of pandemic-related mandates prompting Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to invoke Canada's Emergencies Act, giving the government broad authority to crack down on the demonstrations.</p>

The escalation was criticized by some Canadian officials and by the Canadian Civil Liberties Association (CCLA), which said the move is an overreach to silence dissent.

On Wednesday, several Republican lawmakers in the U.S. penned a letter to Mr. Trudeau in support of the truckers and to express concern over the use of the Emergencies Act to quell the protests.

Several municipalities in both the U.S. and Canada have begun to lift mask mandates since the Freedom Convoy began. Every state in the U.S. except Hawaii has lifted their statewide mask mandates or will let them expire in the coming weeks.

The organizers behind the convoys in the U.S. say that although the COVID-19 mandates remain a central grievance, their complaints extend far beyond the pandemic.

“It’s about our country,” Brian Base said, before hitting the road as part of the People’s Convoy. “It’s about letting our government know that it works for us.”

Mr. Bolus said the convoys were about making average Americans’ voices heard.

“We’re giving them an opportunity to listen to us,” he said. “We are larger than any force they have in this country, and we will shut the interstates and the country down until we’re heard. Until the people get so ticked off they uprise against them. And that’s the bottom line. The people got to get off their butts and fight for their rights.”

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HEADLINE	02/23 Hot days more mental health emergencies
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/feb/23/hot-days-drive-up-mental-health-emergencies-climate-crisis-study-finds
GIST	<p>Hot summer temperatures drive up the number of people suffering mental health emergencies, the most comprehensive study to date has found.</p> <p>The analysis of medical records from millions of US citizens showed an average 8% rise in the rate of emergency hospital visits on days when the temperature was in the top 5% of those recorded across the decade-long study.</p> <p>The effect was seen for almost all mental health conditions, including stress, mood and anxiety disorders, schizophrenia, self-harm, and substance use disorders. The frequency of extreme temperatures is being driven up by the climate crisis, and the researchers said their work could help mental health services predict and prepare for times of greater need.</p> <p>“People are familiar with the risks of extreme heat in terms of dehydration, heatstroke, etc,” said Prof Gregory Wellenius, at the Boston University school of public health in the US and senior author of the research. “What’s really novel is that this study establishes at an unprecedented scale that days of extreme heat can also impact people’s mental health in a substantial way. And this isn’t just for a niche, vulnerable population. This is in every age bracket we looked at, for both men and women, and in every region of the country. Everybody is at risk.”</p> <p>The medical database used for the analysis did not include people without health insurance. “We expect [the 8% rise in risk] is an underestimate of the true burden of disease associated with extreme heat, because the most vulnerable individuals are less likely to be in this database and, frankly, less likely to be treated in the same way for mental health,” Wellenius said.</p> <p>Emergency visits to hospitals are the most severe presentations of mental health disorders, said Prof Amruta Nori-Sarma, also at Boston University and first author of the study: “Even small increases in</p>

the number of emergency department visits represent a huge burden to the individuals and to the system.”

The study showed the biggest increase in the rate of emergency visits was across the north of the US, rising to 12% in the north-west region. That might appear counterintuitive, said Nori-Sarma, as temperatures in the southern US are hotter: “But we see the opposite.”

The reason may be that those living in hotter places are already better adapted, with more access to air conditioners, for example. “This finding is important from a future vulnerability perspective, as we can expect that populations that don’t have those adaptive capacities might be more stressed during times of extreme heat,” she said.

According to a report in May 2021, the climate crisis is inflicting [huge hidden costs on the mental health of people](#) around the world, such as [heatwaves increasing rates of suicide](#), [floods leaving victims traumatised](#), and loss of food security, homes and livelihoods causing stress and depression.

The latest research, which was [published in the journal Jama Psychiatry](#), examined anonymised data on 3.5m emergency hospital visits for mental health disorders made by 2.2 million people from 2010-2019. The study focused on the warmest months, May to September, and covered 2,775 counties, which account for 98% of US citizens. Seven of the warmest years on record for the US have occurred since 2014, the researchers noted.

The increased risk was slightly higher for men than for women, the scientists found, potentially because men are less likely to seek early help and may therefore need emergency care more frequently. The only major mental health disorders that did not prompt a rise in emergency visits on hot days were personality and behavioural disorders, which are relatively rare and therefore had a smaller sample. The rise in emergency visit rates was similar for most disorders, the researchers said, indicating that the heat exacerbates existing conditions. This could be due to increasing daytime irritation or discomfort or by disruption of sleep during hot nights.

“It’s increasingly clear that a changing climate threatens our bodies and our minds,” said Dr Emma Lawrance of Imperial College London, UK, and not part of the study. “While the effect is relatively small, it has big implications for public health and healthcare systems as climate change increases the number of days of extreme heat; children born today will experience [seven times as many heatwaves](#) as their grandparents.”

She added: “It’s not just people with more severe symptoms of mental ill-health who are affected by heat – many of us have more symptoms of anxiety, depression and lower mood at higher temperatures. The effects are unequal though, with poorer communities often more exposed to heat.

“We need climate mitigation to help prevent worsening of these impacts, and climate adaptation to provide more tree cover and access to green space to prevent urban ‘heat islands’.”

The study used a “case-crossover” design, where individuals are followed over a period of time and can therefore serve as their own experimental controls. A person’s increased risk of an emergency visit on a hot day was calculated by comparing that day with the same day of the week in the week before and after. This cancels out other personal factors that might influence the results, such as age or occupation.

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HEADLINE	02/23 Russia digital currency to blunt sanctions
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/23/business/russia-sanctions-cryptocurrency.html
GIST	When the United States barred Americans from doing business with Russian banks, oil and gas developers and other companies in 2014, after the country’s invasion of Crimea, the hit to Russia’s economy was swift and immense. Economists estimated that sanctions imposed by Western nations cost Russia \$50 billion a year .

Since then, the global market for cryptocurrencies and other digital assets has ballooned. That's bad news for enforcers of sanctions, and good news for [Russia](#).

On Tuesday, the Biden administration [enacted fresh sanctions on Russia](#) over the conflict in Ukraine, aiming to thwart its access to foreign capital. But Russian entities are preparing to blunt some of the worst effects by making deals with anyone around the world willing to work with them, experts said. And, they say, those entities can then use digital currencies to bypass the control points that governments rely on — mainly transfers of money by banks — to block deal execution.

“Russia has had a lot of time to think about this specific consequence,” said Michael Parker, a former federal prosecutor who now heads the anti-money laundering and sanctions practice at the Washington law firm Ferrari & Associates. “It would be naïve to think that they haven’t gamed out exactly this scenario.”

Sanctions are some of the most powerful tools the United States and European countries have to influence the behavior of nations they don’t consider allies. The United States in particular is able to use sanctions as a diplomatic tool because the dollar is the world’s reserve currency and used in payments worldwide. But American government officials are increasingly aware of the potential for cryptocurrencies to lessen the impact of sanctions and are stepping up their scrutiny of digital assets.

To apply sanctions, a government makes a list of people and businesses its citizens must avoid. Anyone caught engaging with a member of the list faces heavy fines. But the real key to any effective sanctions program is the global financial system. Banks around the world play a major role in enforcement: They see where money comes from and where it’s bound, and anti-money laundering laws require them to block transactions with sanctioned entities and report what they see to authorities. But if banks are the eyes and ears of governments in this space, the explosion of digital currencies is blinding them.

Banks have to abide by “know your customer” rules, which include verifying their clients’ identities. But exchanges and other platforms that facilitate the buying and selling of cryptocurrencies and digital assets are rarely as good at tracking their customers as banks are, even though they are supposed to follow the same rules. In October, the U.S. Treasury Department warned that cryptocurrencies posed an increasingly serious threat to the American sanctions program and that U.S. authorities needed to educate themselves about the technology.

Should it choose to evade sanctions, Russia has multiple cryptocurrency-related tools at its disposal, experts said. All it needs is to find ways to trade without touching the dollar.

The Russian government is developing its own central bank digital currency, a so-called digital ruble that [it hopes to use](#) to trade directly with other countries willing to accept it without first converting it into dollars. Hacking techniques like ransomware could help Russian actors steal digital currencies and make up revenue lost to sanctions.

And while cryptocurrency transactions are recorded on the underlying blockchain, making them transparent, new tools developed in Russia can help mask the origin of such transactions. That would allow businesses to trade with Russian entities without detection.

There is a precedent for these kinds of workarounds. Iran and North Korea are among countries that have used digital currencies to mitigate the effects of Western sanctions, a trend that U.S. and United Nations officials have recently observed. North Korea, for instance, has used ransomware to steal cryptocurrency to fund its nuclear program, according to a U.N. report.

In October 2020, representatives of Russia’s central bank [told a Moscow newspaper](#) that the new “digital ruble” would make the country less dependent on the United States and better able to resist sanctions. It would let Russian entities conduct transactions outside the international banking system with any country willing to trade in digital currency.

Russia could find willing partners in other nations targeted by U.S. sanctions, [including Iran](#), that are also developing government-backed digital currencies. China, Russia's largest trading partner in both imports and exports according to the World Bank, has already launched its own central bank digital currency. The country's leader, Xi Jinping, recently described China's relationship with Russia as having "[no limits](#)."

The developing system of central banks directly exchanging digital currencies creates new risks, said Yaya Fanusie, a fellow at the Center for a New American Security who has studied the effects of cryptocurrency on sanctions. "The lessening of U.S. sanctions power comes from a system where these nation states are able to do transactions without going through the global banking system."

In early February, independent sanctions monitors told the United Nations Security Council that North Korea [was using cryptocurrencies](#) to fund its nuclear and ballistic missile program, according to Reuters. (A spokesman for Norway's permanent mission to the U.N. confirmed the existence of the report, which has not yet been made public.) Last May, the consulting firm Elliptic described how Iran was using revenue from [Bitcoin mining](#) to make up for the limitations on its ability to sell oil because of sanctions.

Sanctioned Russian entities could deploy their own evasion strategy, using ransomware attacks. The playbook is straightforward: A hacker breaks into computer networks and locks up digital information until the victim pays for its release, usually in cryptocurrency.

Russia is at the center of the [growing ransomware industry](#). Last year, about 74 percent of global ransomware revenue, or more than \$400 million worth of cryptocurrency, went to entities that are probably affiliated with Russia in some way, according to a [Feb. 14 report](#) by the blockchain-tracking firm Chainalysis.

Illegal funds have also flowed into Russia through a dark web marketplace called Hydra, which is powered by cryptocurrency and handled more than \$1 billion in sales in 2020, according to Chainalysis. The platform's strict rules — sellers are allowed to liquidate cryptocurrency only through certain regional exchanges — have made it difficult for researchers to follow the money.

"We know that there's no questions asked, and we know that Hydra operates not just throughout Eastern Europe but throughout western Europe," said Kim Grauer, director of research at Chainalysis. "There's definitely cross-border business happening."

Digital currencies all use blockchain technology, a form of computer code that is publicly viewable by anyone, anywhere. This public ledger keeps track of the movements of individual digital coins from one "wallet" — as online repositories for digital assets are called — to another. In theory, this should let authorities track all crypto transactions and keep sanctioned entities from completing them.

But the technology behind Hydra masks the source of transactions, offering a potential tool for Russian users to move money outside the country's borders. On its own, Hydra is not yet big enough to handle the volume of transactions that Russia would need to successfully evade sanctions. But other money-laundering techniques — including "nesting," in which an illicit marketplace buries itself within a larger, legitimate structure to hide its activities — could also help.

There are signs that the United States is stepping up its monitoring of cryptocurrency activity. On Feb. 17, the Justice Department announced it had created a new national cryptocurrency enforcement team, a move that seemed to emphasize that federal prosecutors were paying extra attention to bad behavior among cryptocurrency users.

Mr. Parker, the former prosecutor, said that the Feb. 8 arrests of a Manhattan couple [for stealing \\$3.6 billion in Bitcoin](#) from the Hong Kong cryptocurrency exchange Bitfinex is "a tangible example of the government getting very good and up to speed on what they need to do to be able to trace this."

Administration officials are also urging the cryptocurrency industry to implement internal controls that prevent bad actors from using their services. In October, the Treasury Department published a 30-page

	<p>sanctions-compliance manual recommending that cryptocurrency companies use geolocation tools to weed out customers in sanctioned jurisdictions. In many cases, the report said, crypto companies have taken months or years to implement such compliance procedures.</p> <p>That may change as the industry starts to mature. Chainalysis offers a “know your transaction” tool that alerts companies when blacklisted entities use their services. Last year, the company doubled its number of private-sector customers, many of whom use the compliance tool.</p> <p>But savvy cryptocurrency users can find ways around a blacklist.</p> <p>“A Treasury designation of a crypto wallet address is not foolproof,” said Mr. Fanusie of the Center for a New American Security. “That designated actor can still open up a new wallet elsewhere. You can do that quite easily.”</p>
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HEADLINE	02/23 Maternal deaths rose first year of pandemic
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/23/health/maternal-deaths-pandemic.html
GIST	<p>The number of women in the United States who died during pregnancy or shortly after giving birth increased sharply during the first year of the coronavirus pandemic, according to a new study, an increase that health officials attribute partly to Covid and pandemic-related disruptions.</p> <p>The new report, from the National Center for Health Statistics, found that the number of maternal deaths rose 14 percent, to 861 in 2020 from 754 in 2019.</p> <p>The United States already has a much higher maternal mortality rate than other developed countries, and the increase in deaths pushes the nation’s maternal mortality rate to 23.8 deaths per 100,000 live births in 2020 from 20.1 deaths in 2019. Maternal mortality rates in developed countries have in recent years ranged from fewer than two deaths per 100,000 live births in Norway and New Zealand to just below nine deaths per 100,000 live births in France and Canada.</p> <p>Black women in America experienced the most deaths: One-third of the pregnant women and new mothers who died in 2020 were Black, though Black Americans make up just over 13 percent of the population. Their mortality rate was nearly three times that of white women.</p> <p>The mortality rate for Hispanic women, which has historically been lower than for white women, also increased significantly in 2020 and is now almost on par with the rate for white women. Death rates increased among all pregnant women older than 24, but particularly in those 40 and over, whose mortality rate was nearly eight times that of women younger than 25.</p> <p>“Our maternal morbidity and mortality is the highest in the developed world, and the trend is continuing despite our awareness of it, despite our maternal-mortality review committees, despite attention in the press,” said Kara Zivin, a professor of psychiatry, obstetrics and gynecology at the University of Michigan who studies access to care during and after pregnancy. “Whatever we’re doing is clearly not enough to address either the overall rate or the disparities.”</p> <p>Although the new report is sparse on details — no maternal mortality figures were provided for American Indian/Alaska Native women, who have higher pregnancy-related deaths than white, Hispanic and Asian/Pacific Islander women — experts said some of the deaths were most likely related to the coronavirus pandemic. Pregnancy puts women at risk for more severe disease if they are infected with the SARS-CoV-2 virus, which causes Covid, and vaccines were not available for them in 2020.</p> <p>“We actually said when the lockdown started that we anticipated an increase in maternal deaths, both due to Covid and the responses to Covid,” said Dr. Denise Jamieson, an obstetrician at Emory University in Atlanta and a member of the Covid expert group at the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, adding that she was not surprised by the increases.</p>

In addition to the greater risks faced by pregnant women who have Covid, she said, “we hadn’t figured out how to deliver obstetric care safely in 2020.”

“Our health systems weren’t set up yet to manage telehealth,” she said, “and there were other barriers: Kids were home from school, and parents couldn’t get away for medical appointments.”

Many doctors had stopped seeing patients in person, hospitals were often crowded and patients avoided emergency rooms filled with Covid patients.

Pregnant women who develop Covid face a higher risk of requiring intensive care or mechanical ventilation. And despite the relative youth of pregnant women, they face a higher risk of dying, studies found. Health experts have been urging them to be vaccinated, but their vaccination rates have remained low.

Black Americans overall suffered disproportionately from the pandemic, with higher hospitalization and death rates than their white counterparts, but the racial disparities in maternal mortality predate and extend beyond Covid, and stem from structural health inequities that have complex root causes.

Stress, mental health problems and substance abuse increased during the pandemic and might also have contributed to worse outcomes, said Dr. Mary D’Alton, chair of the department of obstetrics and gynecology at Columbia University Irving Medical Center.

New programs that provide enhanced services for patients, such as doulas, who can support and advocate for patients, are positive advances, she said.

“We also have to educate our providers on listening to patients,” Dr. D’Alton said. “My dad was a primary care doctor and he used to say, ‘Mary, if you want to know what’s wrong with the patient, ask them and they’ll tell you. But first of all, you’ve got to listen to them.’”

“Pregnant women’s complaints are often dismissed, and that is probably much more significant for Black and brown women,” she added.

Generally speaking, the leading causes of pregnancy-related deaths are cardiovascular conditions, other medical conditions and infections. Research has found that cardiomyopathy, a disease of the heart muscle; blood clots to the lung; and hypertensive disorders of pregnancy contribute to a higher proportion of pregnancy-related deaths among Black women than among white women.

One of the new mothers who died in 2020, whose story was widely reported, was Dr. Chaniece Wallace, a Black physician who was the chief pediatric resident at the Indiana University School of Medicine in Indianapolis.

Dr. Wallace developed a pregnancy complication called pre-eclampsia and her baby girl was delivered early by cesarean section in October 2020. But Dr. Wallace went on to develop additional complications, and she died just days after giving birth.

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HEADLINE	02/23 China Xi redefining relationship with world
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/23/world/asia/china-xi-jinping-world.html
GIST	The miracle of modern China was built on global connections, a belief that sending young people, companies and future leaders to soak up the outside world was the route from impoverishment to power. Now, emboldened by its transformation, the country is shunning the influences and ideas that nourished its rise.

The country's most dominant leader in decades, [Xi Jinping](#), seems intent on redefining China's relationship with the world, recasting the meeting of minds and cultures as [a zero-sum clash](#).

Education officials are imposing restrictions on English education and requiring that scholars ask permission to attend even virtual international conferences. Regulators have punished Chinese companies for raising money overseas. Mr. Xi has exhorted artists to embrace "cultural confidence" by promoting traditional Chinese literature and art, and has warned against imitating Hollywood.

And the government, citing the coronavirus pandemic, is no longer freely issuing most passports, the physical symbol of an interconnected world. Borders are almost entirely shut.

"There's no more integration and exchange between different cultures," said Zhang Jincan, the owner of Dusk Dawn Club, a live-music venue in Beijing.

Before the pandemic, the club was a fixture of the city's curious, plugged-in music scene. Locals crammed in to hear visiting [Polish jazz quintets](#) or [Argentine percussionists](#). Expatriates could discover up-and-coming Chinese punk bands. Performances were often organized with foreign cultural organizations.

Now, Mr. Zhang worries that the very essence of his club is disappearing. "You get a kind of aesthetic fatigue," he said.

There is little chance of returning to the isolationism of the Mao era, when the nation was sealed off from the world financially as well as culturally. The pandemic has made clear how much [the global economy relies](#) upon China, and how much China has benefited. Mr. Xi says he has no intention of decoupling from other economies.

"Countries around the world should uphold true multilateralism," he [told](#) the World Economic Forum last month. "We should remove barriers, not erect walls."

But if the government values the economic benefits of globalization, the same does not seem true of less tangible ones: artistic, intellectual, interpersonal. Those ties — which made China not just a fixture of the world economy, but a member of the global community — are being scrutinized, restricted or rejected.

Anything seen as — or, increasingly, tarred as — foreign is vulnerable to attack by vitriolic online nationalists. Celebrities promoting vegetarianism have been [accused](#) of peddling Western lifestyles.

Even this month's Winter Olympics in Beijing, by definition one of the most globally minded events in the world, was conducted on China's terms: without foreign spectators, and in defiance of diplomatic boycotts by countries including the United States.

It was sports that once smoothed the way for diplomatic entreaties.

After the Communists took power in 1949, the first Americans to officially enter China, decades later, were nine table tennis players. The countries' teams met in 1971 at the World Table Tennis Championship in Japan, and the Chinese government invited the Americans for a weeklong visit, in which they toured the Great Wall, watched a dance troupe and played matches. A year after the "[Ping-Pong diplomacy](#)," President Richard Nixon made his historic [visit to China](#), the opening salvo for the two countries to re-establish diplomatic ties.

In the decades that followed, China's deepening global connections signaled its expanding ambitions.

More than 6.5 million Chinese studied abroad between 1978 and 2019, with the number rising each year. Chinese tech companies listed on Wall Street, their innovations copied by Silicon Valley. Schoolteachers used songs by Western boy bands to teach English, seen as [vital for](#) economic opportunities.

The outside world was hungry to know more about China, too. Between [2002](#) and 2018, the number of international students in China grew [nearly sixfold](#). The 2008 Beijing Olympics helped the country pitch itself as a global tourist destination.

Wariness lingered. Deng Xiaoping, the leader who spearheaded the economic opening, memorably warned that an open window brings both fresh air and flies. But in those heady early days, many believed that China was hurtling irreversibly toward openness.

Mr. Xi proved them wrong. Since he took over in 2012, the Chinese Communist Party has restricted foreign [nongovernmental organizations](#), accusing some of conspiring against the country. It has banned overseas [textbooks](#), emphasizing that only it can guide China to greatness. Increasing hostility from the United States also prodded Chinese leaders into a more defensive posture.

The coronavirus crystallized those tendencies. Bent on [stamping out infections](#), China canceled virtually all international flights. State media fixated on the West's death toll.

To limit imported cases, officials [said](#) they would not issue or renew passports, except for emergencies, work or study abroad. The number of passports issued in the first half of 2021 was 2 percent of the same period in 2019.

Sarah Duan, 16, applied for a passport in December, after being admitted to a private high school in Seattle. Immigration officials in her home of Shanxi Province told her that minors were not allowed to leave the country, she said.

Ms. Duan called the national immigration administration, which said no such policy existed.

Still, local officers rebuffed her, arguing that the pandemic overseas was too dangerous, or pointing to China's fraught relationship with the United States.

"I wanted to say, what do U.S.-China tensions have to do with me?" said Ms. Duan, who finally secured a passport last month. Shanxi immigration officials did not return a faxed request for comment.

Despite his rhetorical commitments, Mr. Xi is narrowing the scope of economic engagement, calling for [reduced reliance on exports](#) and keeping Chinese companies closer to home. After [Didi Chuxing](#) went public in New York last year without regulators' blessing, the Chinese government announced an investigation into the ride-hailing company. Within months, Didi [delisted](#).

And though China wants foreign money, it is driving away the people who accompany it. The number of foreigners living in Beijing and Shanghai has dropped by nearly one-third in the past decade, according to [European](#) business groups.

Even after China opens its borders, some fear the deteriorating climate will keep foreigners from coming. Before the pandemic, Sarah Keenlyside, who has lived in Beijing for 16 years, [organized tours](#) for Western executives visiting on business. First-timers sometimes came nervously, with concerns and misconceptions about government surveillance. But they left impressed by the high-speed trains and safe cities. Some returned for family vacations.

"It's sort of a vicious cycle," Ms. Keenlyside said. "If people don't come, then they don't get to see it for themselves."

Stereotypes are likely to harden in the other direction, as China imposes new curbs on outside influences. Last summer, education officials barred online tutoring firms from [hiring teachers based overseas](#), cutting off a popular source of English lessons and cultural exchange. In December, regulators [ordered](#) television credits to specify whether any actors or crew had foreign citizenship.

Those decisions were couched as part of broader moves to [ease students' workloads](#), or tame China's [unruly celebrity culture](#). But officials at times have been more explicit about the insidious effects of foreign ideas. Mr. Xi has [denounced](#) blind worship of Western cultural products, and [demanded](#) confidence in traditional culture, which he calls a "major issue related to the rise and fall of national fortunes."

The art world has raced to comply in ways that concern Jiang Bing, a contemporary art curator.

Ms. Jiang helped organize this year's Chengdu Biennale, which features hundreds of works from China and abroad. She said many artists still want to engage with their international counterparts. But she had seen others reaching for obvious symbols of Chinese heritage, such as [Ming dynasty clothing](#), rather than searching for more nuanced or novel ways to express cultural pride.

"If there's no corresponding process of thinking, questioning and criticism, that can't be real cultural confidence," she said.

Some say the emphasis on the homegrown is a natural result of China's rising status. While American films once often sat atop the Chinese box office, domestic ones now dominate. Local fashion designers, long dismissed as second-rate, command [higher prices](#).

Sun Lei, 24, moved to Britain last fall for a master's degree, having long aspired to study and work abroad. But the country's lax virus management gave him a deeper appreciation for China's ability to carry out policies without the friction seen in Western democracies.

"The reality is that China's development and entire economic situation are trending upward," said Mr. Sun, who intends to return home after graduation. "That's beneficial for my personal development."

Still, he plans to use a virtual private network to access blocked overseas websites after moving back. China's growing middle class, increasingly well traveled and fluent in global pop culture, is unlikely to accept a wholesale retreat from the outside world.

Even some unexpected voices have defended cultural engagement.

"Technology has guaranteed that cultural distance is impossible," said Wang Xiaodong, a self-described nationalist blogger with more than 6 million social media followers. Mr. Wang avidly follows American television shows, including Game of Thrones and Westworld.

But the government is [tightening controls over VPNs](#). Those who criticize China's increasing insularity are often censored or drowned out by nationalist voices. Mr. Wang has himself been attacked online for saying that China needs global engagement.

The virtual vitriol has real-world consequences. Last fall, officials in the northeastern city of Dalian [shuttered](#) a Japan-themed shopping complex within two weeks of opening, after online commenters denounced it as a form of cultural invasion.

In the long term, the hostility could imperil the very rise that nationalists are eager to promote.

As the pandemic forced academic exchanges to move online, Chinese universities [ordered](#) scholars attending virtual conferences organized abroad to submit the agendas for advance approval. The state-run Chinese Academy of Sciences [requires](#) foreign scholars giving online guest lectures to share their passport details.

Last year, a government adviser [formally warned](#) China's legislature that the restrictions could harm foreign policy. "Excessive management will affect experts' analysis of international issues and the quality of their advice," [wrote](#) the adviser, Jia Qingguo, who is also a Peking University professor.

	Reached by email, Professor Jia agreed to an interview. But he said regulations required university approval first, which never came.
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HEADLINE	02/23 Between the lines: close look Putin speech
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/23/world/europe/putin-speech-russia-ukraine.html?action=click&module=Well&pgtype=Homepage&section=World%20News
GIST	<p>In a long and heated address on Monday, Vladimir V. Putin, Russia's president, spun a narrative whose implications sprawl well beyond his stated purpose of recognizing the independence of two Ukrainian territories held by Moscow-backed separatists.</p> <p>Mr. Putin's speech was awash with hard-line Russian nationalism, angry paranoia toward the West, baseless claims of Ukrainian aggression, a sense of lost imperial pride on the verge of reclamation and, most of all, invocations of history, much of it distorted or fabricated.</p> <p>While his comments might have sounded rambling to Western ears, Mr. Putin may in fact have been articulating what amounted to a calculated series of justifications for a further invasion of Ukraine aimed at the Russian public, whose support he will need to maintain it. What follows is a concise annotation of several key passages that convey Mr. Putin's overt and implied case for war.</p> <p>Challenging Borders Since time immemorial, the people living in the southwest of what has historically been Russian land have called themselves Russians and Orthodox Christians. So, I will start with the fact that modern Ukraine was entirely created by Russia or, to be more precise, by Bolshevik, Communist Russia. This process started practically right after the 1917 revolution, and Lenin and his associates did it in a way that was extremely harsh on Russia — by separating, severing what is historically Russian land.</p> <p>Mr. Putin is repeating his longstanding argument that Ukraine's borders are an artificial creation of Soviet planners who unjustly cordoned rightful Russian land within the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic.</p> <p>In reality, internal Soviet borders reflected centuries-old cultural and political divides, as well as what Moscow's own census takers found to be an ethnic Ukrainian majority throughout that territory, including in what is now eastern Ukraine.</p> <p>Mr. Putin's comments, which build on his justification for annexing Crimea in 2014, imply a mandate to assert Russian sovereignty over part or all of eastern Ukraine, as well, even if for now he is only recognizing the independence of the Moscow-backed separatists who control parts of it.</p> <p>His repeated references to Ukraine as artificial, and his past claims that "Ukraine is not even a state," as he said in 2008, suggest he may also be leaving himself the option of declaring all of Ukraine to be a historical invention, serving to justify a wider invasion.</p> <p>A Heavy Threat And today the "grateful progeny" has overturned monuments to Lenin in Ukraine. They call it de-communization. You want de-communization? Very well, this suits us just fine. But why stop halfway? We are ready to show what real de-communizations would mean for Ukraine.</p> <p>Mr. Putin is pointedly suggesting that Ukrainians should have thanked Vladimir Lenin, the founding Soviet leader whom Mr. Putin blames for Ukraine's borders, rather than overturning Soviet-era statues during 2014 protests against Kyiv's pro-Moscow government.</p> <p>His reference to "real de-communization" implies that Mr. Putin is preparing to erase what he considers Lenin's actual legacy by forcibly redrawing Ukraine's borders to his liking.</p>

Reinstating Soviet Claims

The virus of nationalist ambitions is still with us, and the mine laid at the initial stage to destroy state immunity to the disease of nationalism was ticking. As I have already said, the mine was the right of secession from the Soviet Union.

Mr. Putin simultaneously presents himself as championing Russian nationalism, through blood-and-soil territorial claims, and as fighting the “disease of nationalism,” in this case Ukraine’s long struggle for national autonomy.

This contradiction is rooted in his obsession with the breakup of the Soviet Union, to which he dedicates a long section of his speech.

It is now that radicals and nationalists, including and primarily those in Ukraine, are taking credit for having gained independence. As we can see, this is absolutely wrong. The disintegration of our united country was brought about by the historic, strategic mistakes on the part of the Bolshevik leaders and the C.P.S.U. leadership, mistakes committed at different times in state-building and in economic and ethnic policies. The collapse of the historical Russia known as the U.S.S.R. is on their conscience.

Mr. Putin argues that Ukraine and other former Soviet republics were manipulated into declaring independence from Moscow by self-interested opportunists.

In reality, an overwhelming majority of Ukrainians — including in the eastern Ukrainian regions that Mr. Putin suggests were ripped from Russia against their residents’ will — voted to establish an independent state.

These comments portray the Ukrainian state as an illegitimate creation: an act of theft from Russia and Ukrainians who should still be under Moscow’s rule.

And, in an escalation drawing concern across Europe, Mr. Putin suggests that this applies to all former Soviet republics. Three of those countries are now NATO members, meaning that the alliance has committed to their defense: Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

An Attack on Legitimacy

The Ukrainian authorities — I would like to emphasize this — began by building their statehood on the negation of everything that united us, trying to distort the mentality and historical memory of millions of people, of entire generations living in Ukraine. It is not surprising that Ukrainian society was faced with the rise of far-right nationalism, which rapidly developed into aggressive Russophobia and neo-Nazism.

This is the beginning of Mr. Putin’s explicit case for war to seize parts of eastern Ukraine and his implied case for possible war against all of Ukraine.

The modern Ukrainian state itself, he argues, is a kind of attack on Russia because it divides Ukrainian and Russian peoples who should be united and because it cultivates anti-Russian extremism to justify this division.

In reality, Ukraine’s ethnic and linguistic groups have coexisted far more peacefully than Mr. Putin claims. While the country’s Russian-speaking populations have sometimes favored political ties with Moscow over those with the West, the country’s politics have reflected this, and those groups have grown sharply distrustful of Russia since 2014.

Essentially, the so-called pro-Western civilizational choice made by the oligarchic Ukrainian authorities was not and is not aimed at creating better conditions in the interests of people’s well-being but at keeping the billions of dollars that the oligarchs have stolen from the Ukrainians and

are holding in their accounts in Western banks, while reverently accommodating the geopolitical rivals of Russia.

Here Mr. Putin extends his historical revisionism into an indictment of modern Ukraine. Its government, he argues, is not a real government but a clan of thieves — and therefore due none of the rights of a sovereign state — as well as an intrinsic threat to Russian security.

By couching his case in the supposed illegitimacy of the Ukrainian state itself, Mr. Putin is suggesting that no policy change or diplomatic concession could alleviate this threat. It is, in a sense, a declaration that there is no point in negotiation, that Moscow has no choice but to coerce Kyiv's leaders by force, or else remove them outright.

A False 'Anti-Russian' Campaign

The policy to root out the Russian language and culture and promote assimilation carries on. The Verkhovna Rada has generated a steady flow of discriminatory bills, and the law on the so-called Indigenous people has already come into force. People who identify as Russians and want to preserve their identity, language and culture are getting the signal that they are not wanted in Ukraine.

Since 2004, Ukraine has moved, often slowly, to elevate the status of the Ukrainian language.

Russian officials and state media have sought to portray this as part of a galling campaign to marginalize or [even outright exterminate](#) Ukraine's Russian-speaking populations.

They prefer not to acknowledge this, there is no genocide perpetrated against 14 million people.

Such claims, which are largely fictitious, serve to justify Russian military interventions as protecting populations that Moscow had both a right and a duty to defend. They also implicitly assert a Russian right to dominate what Mr. Putin has called the "Russian world" — territory containing large numbers of Russian speakers or ethnic Russians, which roughly maps onto the old Soviet borders.

In 2014, similar accusations, supported by grisly, false stories of anti-Russian atrocities in Ukraine, provoked widespread anti-Ukraine sentiment in Russia.

But Russian attitudes toward Ukraine have since cooled to 45 percent favorable and 43 percent negative, a [recent poll](#) found. Other polls suggest most do not want overt war, which may be why Mr. Putin is seeking to renew public outrage.

A Defensive War

The Kyiv authorities cannot challenge the clearly stated choice of the people, which is why they have opted for aggressive action, for activating extremist cells, including radical Islamist organizations, for sending subversives to stage terrorist attacks at critical infrastructure facilities, and for kidnapping Russian citizens. We have factual proof that such aggressive actions are being taken with support from Western security services.

In fact, this is nothing other than preparation for hostilities against our country, Russia.

These outlandish accusations of Ukrainian and Western plots to attack Russia are most likely intended for the Russian public, portraying further invasion of Ukraine as necessary to defend Russian families — rather than a pursuit of lofty regional ambitions that might be a harder sell.

But these claims might not be entirely strategic. After many years in office, Mr. Putin has [tightened his inner circle](#) to a small cadre of yes-men and security service hard-liners, who are thought to [tell him](#) only what he wants to hear.

It is possible that Mr. Putin sincerely believes some portion of the foreign threats he claims, perhaps especially those regarding NATO.

The Ukrainian army is waiting to get into NATO. ... The West has explored the territory of Ukraine as a future theater, future battlefield, that is aimed against Russia.

Mr. Putin has long striven to prevent more of Russia's neighbors from joining NATO. Throughout negotiations during the current crisis, he has insisted that NATO revoke Washington's 2008 declaration that it would consider membership for Ukraine or Georgia.

It is difficult to say for certain whether his claims of a NATO plot to attack Russia represent his sincere belief or an exaggeration for political effect.

Inevitable Sanctions

Once again, they threatened us with sanctions. They will still impose those, the stronger and more powerful our country becomes. They will always find an excuse to introduce more sanctions regardless of the situation in Ukraine. The only goal they have is to contain the development of Russia.

Mr. Putin is telling Russians that there is no point in constraining Russian foreign policy to avoid sanctions that will come no matter what — and that, should Russians suffer under further economic isolation, Mr. Putin and his policies will be blameless.

This may be one of the few lines in the speech aimed at Western capitals as well as at his audience at home. European leaders know that severe economic sanctions will harm their economies as well as Russia's. Mr. Putin may be hoping to persuade them that such a sacrifice will be futile.

A Purposeful Fog of War

Now, almost every day, they are shelling settlements. They have amassed large troops. They are using vehicles and other heavy machinery. They are torturing people, children, women, elderly people. It does not stop. We have seen no end to it.

Mr. Putin's speech culminates by describing an entirely false Ukrainian military assault on the country's separatist-held east. In reality, in advance of his speech, Russia-backed forces shelled territory along the line of control between Ukrainian and separatist forces.

This is likely aimed at muddying the Russian public's understanding. If both sides accuse one another of unwarranted aggression, then who can say which is true?

But his depiction may be intended to justify even greater action than the order he issued after his speech for a Russian "peacekeeping operation" in separatist-held territories.

Western governments have repeatedly claimed that their intelligence shows that Mr. Putin is planning to stage a supposed attack on Russia-backed forces to justify a fuller invasion, perhaps even a siege of Kyiv. Many of Russia's forces are massed on Ukraine's northern and southern borders, far from the separatist-held east.

The picture that Mr. Putin paints at the end of his speech, of a vast Ukrainian campaign of terror abetted by hostile Western governments bent on attacking Russia, seems to leave that option open.

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HEADLINE	02/23 Some should wait longer 2nd Covid shot
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-science-health-centers-for-disease-control-and-prevention-347bc79469ffed5f5b163ca41cf0f1c0
GIST	NEW YORK (AP) — Some people getting Pfizer or Moderna COVID-19 vaccines should consider waiting up to eight weeks between the first and second doses, instead of the three or four weeks previously recommended, U.S. health officials said.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on Tuesday quietly changed [its advice](#) on spacing the shots.

CDC officials said they were reacting to research showing that the longer interval can provide more enduring protection against the coronavirus. Research suggests that 12- to 64-year-olds — especially males ages 12 to 39 — can benefit from the longer spacing, the CDC said.

They also say the longer wait may help diminish an already rare vaccination side effect: a form of heart inflammation seen in some young men.

The change won't affect many people, coming 14 months after the beginning of the U.S. vaccination campaign. The CDC says 73% of people age 12 and older already have gotten two doses of vaccine.

Also, the suggestion to wait up to two months doesn't apply to all. The original, shorter interval is still recommended for people with weakened immune systems; people 65 and older; and anyone who needs fast protection due to risk of severe disease.

Dr. William Schaffner, a Vanderbilt University vaccines expert, said the action makes sense.

Early in the pandemic, there was intense pressure to adopt as tight a vaccination schedule as possible. "The virus was spreading. People were dying. We wanted to get the vaccine into their arms as quickly as possible," Schaffner said.

Based on studies done by vaccine makers, the government authorized the Pfizer shots as a two-dose series spaced three weeks apart, and the Moderna shots to be spaced four weeks apart.

Some people — mostly adolescent and young adult males — developed a side effect involving inflammation in or around the heart after the second shot. The CDC says that among males ages 18 to 39, the condition has been reported in about 68 per 1 million getting the second Moderna dose and about 47 per 1 million getting the second Pfizer dose.

Some research has suggested that delaying the second dose until eight weeks reduces that risk, CDC officials said.

If already-vaccinated people are worried that they got less than the maximum amount of protection by getting shots according to the original schedule, they can allay those fears by getting a booster shot, Schaffner said.

"We really have very good data indicating that two doses plus the booster provide very strong protection against severe disease," he said.

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HEADLINE	02/23 More trouble for a troubled market
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/23/business/stock-market-correction.html?action=click&module=Well&pgtype=Homepage&section=Business
GIST	<p>The U.S. stock market has been stumbling since the beginning of the year. Now, Russia's escalating conflict with Ukraine is adding considerably to the market's problems.</p> <p>After President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia ordered troops to enter two separatist-controlled enclaves in Ukraine, the S&P 500, which often serves as a proxy for the U.S. stock market, also crossed a notable threshold.</p>

On Tuesday, the S&P 500 fell to 4,304.76, down 1.01 percent for the day. That wasn't much of a loss, but it nonetheless represented a notable milestone. It brought the stock market down 10.3 percent from its most recent peak on Jan. 3.

On Wednesday, the index dropped another 1.84 percent, bringing its losses from the record to 11.9 percent.

In Wall Street jargon, that meant the S&P 500 is in a "correction," because its losses since Jan. 3 exceeded 10 percent.

That 10 percent definition is entirely arbitrary and the subject of many quibbles, but this much is clear: A correction is not a good thing.

"It's an early warning indicator that tells you the market isn't heading in the direction you want it to be going in," said [Edward Yardeni](#), an independent Wall Street economist who has compiled detailed records on modern stock market history. "A 10 percent decline isn't that bad in itself, necessarily, but if the market keeps heading down, the next thing you know, you're down 20 percent and then by common agreement you're in a bear market and, maybe, worrying about a recession."

What makes the market decline disconcerting is that an escalating geopolitical conflict in Eastern Europe is now being added to the [stock market's ample woes](#).

Stocks have been falling for weeks, for a variety of reasons. Concerns about the prospect of [rising interest rates](#) and generally tighter monetary policy from the Federal Reserve are at the top of my personal list.

The Fed is, perhaps belatedly, planning at its meeting on March 15-16 to start increasing its benchmark funds rate from its current near-zero level, and then to begin reducing its \$8.9 trillion [balance sheet](#). All that is intended to mitigate the inflation that is running at an annual rate of [7.5 percent](#), a 40-year high.

In addition, the death, illness and inconvenience caused by the coronavirus pandemic have had myriad pernicious effects. The labor force in the United States is smaller than it would be otherwise, and the economy's service sector hasn't fully rebounded. The pandemic has also caused [supply chain bottlenecks](#) that have held back sales and production and increased the prices of important products as varied as automobiles and kitchen appliances.

Many publicly traded companies are circumventing these problems and passing the associated costs on to consumers, but their ability to keep doing so, while generating the profits that fuel the stock market, is questionable.

The Russia-Ukraine crisis threatens to make matters worse for the economy and the markets. Russia produces important commodities, like palladium, which is needed in the catalytic converters of gasoline-powered automobiles, and whose prices have contributed to the high inflation in the United States.

The anticipation of interruptions in commodity supplies has increased prices in futures markets, particularly for oil and natural gas, all of which could go much higher if the Ukraine crisis intensifies and if [Western sanctions](#) begin to [bite](#).

For those who remember the 1970s and early 1980s, an era of soaring inflation and [multiple recessions](#) caused in part by a geopolitical shift and two oil shocks, the possibility of a 2020s parallel is deeply disturbing.

So is the fact that Russia is a nuclear power engaging in aggressive action against an independent country that is supported by NATO. The possibility that the conflict could be the start of a new Cold War, or something even worse, can't be totally dismissed.

That said, for investors, it's worth remembering that since the stock market hit bottom in March 2020, the S&P 500 rose 114.4 percent through Jan. 3. Compared with that stupendous increase, the market's decline since then has been inconsequential.

What's more, although just about everyone who closely follows the stock market agrees that it has had a correction, there is no agreement on when it took place. [Laszlo Birinyi](#), who began analyzing the market with Salomon Brothers back in 1976, says a correction happens whenever the market crosses the 10 percent border, whether it's at the end of the trading day or in the middle of it.

That's why Mr. Birinyi, who heads his own independent stock market research firm, Birinyi Associates in Westport, Conn., says a market correction occurred on Jan. 24, not on Tuesday. The market at one point on Jan. 24 dropped as far as 12 percent below its close on Jan. 3 before rebounding smartly.

"The psychology of the market, the mood, shifted then," Mr. Birinyi said. "People were panicky until then — and then they weren't."

The market has moved sideways since then, and has now dropped a bit further. In purely financial terms, that decline, in itself, isn't a big deal, in his estimation.

Mr. Birinyi focuses on picking individual stocks, not on market averages, and says he doesn't let such minor things as market corrections affect his strategy.

"We don't focus on 10 percent increases when the market is on its way up," he said. "We wouldn't sell stocks just because there's been a 10 percent gain. And it doesn't really matter if there's a 10 percent decline, either."

For his part, Mr. Yardeni says he views Jan. 24 as a psychologically important moment, too. It represented "a capitulation in the markets" — a juncture at which many investors simply gave up and sold their shares, allowing the market momentum to shift as bargain seekers began to bid up stocks.

Mr. Yardeni labels episodes like these as "panic attacks" and says Jan. 24 was the end of the 73rd such attack since the start of a long bull market in 2009. The Russian hostilities and the stock market decline on Tuesday probably represented the 74th attack. "There's no science here," he said. "It's totally subjective."

Investors panic easily, he said, but they will be better off, most of the time, if they just hang on. "I don't think we're in a bear market, is really what I'm saying," he added.

As far as market labels like these go, I'm agnostic. Are we in a bull market, a bear market, a correction or a panic attack? I can't say.

I know only that the geopolitics of the Ukraine crisis make me nervous in a way no simple market decline can.

It doesn't pay to panic. But this week, I'm worried.

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HEADLINE	02/24 Ukraine military outgunned by Russia
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/24/world/europe/ukraine-war-military.html
GIST	Even with the tons of weapons, ammunition and equipment delivered to Ukraine by Western allies in just the last few weeks, the Ukrainian military is outgunned by the larger, more technologically advanced Russian forces that have launched a multipronged invasion.

Back in December, the commander of Ukraine's military intelligence service, Gen. Kyrylo O. Budanov, outlined a scenario in which a Russian invasion would begin with airstrikes and rocket attacks aimed at ammunition depots and trench-bound troops — foreshadowing the attack that came early Thursday morning.

Very quickly, he said, the Ukrainian military would be incapacitated, its leadership unable to coordinate a defense and supply the front. After that, he said, responsibility would fall to frontline commanders to carry on the fight alone.

“They will hold up as long as there are bullets,” General Budanov said in an interview. “They’ll be able to use what they have in their hands, but believe me, without delivery of reserves, there’s not an army in the world that can hold out.”

General Budanov spoke at a time when the Russian military had deployed about 100,000 troops to the region. By the time of the invasion, according to U.S. officials, Russia had amassed an estimated 190,000 troops in or near Ukraine, including in Crimea and in Russia-backed separatist areas in the eastern Donbas region.

In recent weeks, the Russian military also deployed advanced S-400 antiaircraft systems that could effectively neutralize Ukraine's small air force, as well as Iskander-M cruise missiles capable of striking targets just about anywhere in Ukraine.

The Russian force includes 120 to 125 battalion tactical groups, up from the mid-80s earlier in the month, according to two U.S. officials familiar with the American intelligence assessment. Some of the forces are Russian reservists who would make up an occupation force after an invasion, the officials said. The officials asked for anonymity to discuss government assessments.

Ukraine has only slightly more enlisted soldiers and officers in its entire military, according to the Ministry of Defense. The roughly 200 aircraft that comprise Ukraine's entire air force are fewer than the number of fighter planes that Russia has deployed already to the Ukrainian border.

But Ukraine's military is not the pushover it once was. In 2014, elite Russia troops were able to seize the entire Crimean Peninsula in southern Ukraine without firing a shot. When Russian-backed separatists then took over part of the Donbas, Ukraine had to rely on volunteer brigades of people who took up arms, with little or no military training.

The Ukrainian military has since clawed its way back, fighting the separatists to a stalemate and putting a stop to the most serious hostilities. It did so with help from Western allies.

The United States alone has provided \$2.5 billion in military assistance that has included high-tech surveillance and communications equipment and drones. In November, the United States delivered about 88 tons of ammunition, part of a \$60 million military aid package pledged by the Biden administration.

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HEADLINE	02/24 How Russia invasion is unfolding
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/24/world/europe/how-russia-attacked-ukraine.html
GIST	<p>Early Thursday, just as President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia announced on television that he had decided “to carry out a special military operation” in Ukraine, explosions were reported across the country.</p> <p>Blasts were heard in Kyiv, the capital; in Kharkiv, the second largest city; and in Kramatorsk in the region of Donetsk, one of two eastern Ukrainian territories claimed by Russia-backed separatists since 2014.</p> <p>Ukraine's Interior Ministry said that Russian troops had landed in the southern port city of Odessa and were crossing from Russia into Kharkiv. Footage captured by security cameras showed Russian military vehicles crossing into Ukraine from Crimea, the peninsula that Russia seized in 2014.</p>

Rocket attacks targeted Ukrainian fighter jets parked at an airport outside Kyiv, and Ukraine closed its airspace to commercial flights, citing the “potential hazard to military aviation.”

As air raid sirens blared in Kyiv, the western city of Lviv and other urban areas, residents rushed to take shelter in bus and subway stations. In Kyiv, people packed up their cars and waited in long lines to fill up with gas on their way out of the city. In eastern Ukraine, early signs of panic appeared on the streets as lines formed at A.T.M.s and gas stations.

With attacks across the country, it quickly became clear that Russia’s campaign, whatever Mr. Putin meant by a “special military operation,” was aimed at far more than the rebel territories in the east. Within an hour, Ukraine’s state emergency service said that attacks had been launched in 10 regions of Ukraine, primarily in the east and south, and that reports of new shelling were “coming in constantly.”

Dmytro Kuleba, Ukraine’s foreign minister, called it “a full-scale invasion of Ukraine” and said his country would defend itself, while calling on the world to “stop Putin.”

Russia’s Defense Ministry said that it was using “high-precision weapons” to disable military infrastructure, air defense facilities, military airfields and Ukrainian army planes, Russia’s state-run RIA Novosti news agency reported. But the ministry said it was not attacking cities, and promised that “the civilian population is not at risk.”

The Ukrainian authorities said that invading naval forces were coming ashore at multiple points, including in Kharkiv and the southern city of Kherson. Three emergency workers were injured when a command post was struck by shelling in Nizhyn, in the north, and six people were trapped under rubble when the city’s airport came under attack, Ukraine’s Interior Ministry reported.

Military depots, warehouses and National Guard were hit with artillery blasts, the ministry said.

As dawn broke in Kyiv, President Volodymyr Zelensky of Ukraine said that he had declared martial law. The country’s defense minister told citizens that the army was “fending off enemy forces” and “doing everything it can to protect you.”

But the army was under siege. In the east, Russia-backed separatists — their ranks bolstered by the arrival of hundreds of Russian mercenaries in recent days, according to European officials — said they were hammering Ukrainian troops along the entire 250-mile front line that has divided the rebels and Ukrainian forces since 2014.

Seeking to capture the entire territories of Donetsk and Luhansk, which Mr. Putin recognized as independent on Monday, the rebels were “using all weapons at their disposal,” the Russian news media reported. Ukrainian officials said the attacks included artillery strikes.

Ukraine’s state border service reported that Russian troops stationed in Belarus, north of Ukraine, had launched an attack with support from the Belarusian military. Russia had deployed as many as 30,000 troops to Belarus for exercises this month that the United States warned could provide cover for an attack against Kyiv, which lies a fast 140-mile drive away from a main border crossing.

By mid-morning in Kyiv, Russia’s Defense Ministry said it had disabled all of Ukraine’s air defenses and air bases. Ukraine’s Interior Ministry said that Russian forces had captured two villages in the Luhansk region.

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HEADLINE	02/23 WA preventative measures against wildfires
SOURCE	https://www.king5.com/article/news/local/wildfire/washington-state-taking-many-preventative-measures-against-wildfires/281-0ff304a2-8f79-46f8-9722-b96aa9669301

GIST	<p>Washington state is already doing many of the things a U.N. report recommends nations do to prevent devastating wildfires.</p> <p>It's what the U.N calls the “fire ready formula,” that includes more planning, prevention preparedness, and recovery funding.</p> <p>Washington’s Department of Natural Resources, the largest firefighting agency in the state, already has a Forest Health Plan. Part of it is aimed at reducing fuel loads in forests - small bushes, trees, and other burnable material that would not have been there prior to a century of fire suppression.</p> <p>On Tuesday, agency fire managers were hunkered down in planning for the upcoming season.</p> <p>“The best way to get ready for a fire season is to be proactive,” said Thomas Kyle-Milward, a spokesperson for the agency. “Being prepared with the climate we’re seeing worsen and more severe fire seasons becoming the norm ... from fire seasons to fire years.”</p> <p>More Washington fires are starting earlier in the summer, and the number of fires is going up in western Washington, which is the cooler and moister side of the state.</p> <p>It's similar story elsewhere in the world.</p> <p>The western U.S., northern Siberia, central India, and eastern Australia already are seeing more blazes, and the likelihood of catastrophic wildfires globally could increase more than 50% by the turn of the century, according to the report from the U.N. Environment Program. Areas once considered safe from major fires won't be immune, including the Arctic, which the report said was “very likely to experience a significant increase in burning.”</p> <p>Tropical forests in Indonesia and the southern Amazon of South America also are likely to see increased wildfires, the report concluded.</p> <p>“Uncontrollable and devastating wildfires are becoming an expected part of the seasonal calendars in many parts of the world,” said Andrew Sullivan, with the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation in Australia, one of the report's authors.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/23 Winemakers struggle; adapt, manage crops
SOURCE	https://www.king5.com/article/tech/science/environment/washington-winemakers-struggle-to-save-crops/281-342a0012-d962-4f89-a1bc-728cbde4f0b8
GIST	<p>YAKIMA COUNTY, Wash. — The vines of the wine industry spread across eastern Washington with more than 1,000 wineries producing more wine than any other state, except California.</p> <p>Eighty-two of those wineries are in Yakima Valley, with vineyards covering 12,000 acres that are pumping out one-third of Washington's grapes.</p> <p>But warming temperatures threaten to turn that culture to ash as climate change forces winegrowers to adjust their process.</p> <p>"It's how we react to the weather and we try and react in a proactive way," said Dustin Tobin, vineyard manager at Precept Wine Brands.</p> <p>The company, the largest privately-owned wine company in the Northwest, is spending February removing grapevines first planted in the early 1990s that no longer producer quality fruit.</p> <p>"The late 80s and early 90s, that's around the time grape growing became popular in the region - and if these vines could talk," Tobin said.</p>

The Pacific Northwest warmed by about 1.3 degrees between 1895 and 2011, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

Tobin is from Yakima Valley and grew up in an agricultural family. Over the years he saw the shift from spray to drip irrigation for efficiency as water levels started decreasing. But with more extreme heat waves and droughts like the record-breaking highs seen last summer, Tobin is learning to work with an even more limited water supply.

"We just rotated the water every six hours. What got water on a Monday from Noon to 6 p.m., which is the hardest part of the day, got water on Tuesday from 6 p.m. to midnight," Tobin explained.

Wine grapes don't need a lot of water compared to apples and other fruit grown in the area, but winemaking is as much of an art as it is a science. Each grape grower reacts to climate change differently.

Dick Bouchey has been growing vine grapes in Yakima Valley for 41 years and says though he's not in denial about climate change, he also has no plans on moving Boushey Vineyards because of it.

"We have to adapt and manage our ground," said Bouchey who grows Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Cabernet Franc - wines that fair well in the heat.

Winemakers in the area are thinking of growing different varieties better suited for warmer temperatures and problem solving, he said.

"We're hiding the fruit with the canopy. We didn't use to do that. We used to expose it. Our row orientation is changing a little bit," Bouchey said of some of the changes he's made.

He worries even with water and heat management, warmer temperatures in the mountains mean even less water stored as snow impacting the reservoirs serving the Yakima Valley, like the ones seen along I-90.

"Nothing's been built since before World War II. And yet there's way more water demand. And at some point that's going to catch up with us," said Bouchey, whose vineyard sits on the Roza Irrigation District.

The district is a junior rights district, which means when there is not enough water to go around, they might not get any.

Though Tobin and Bouchey say their harvest was down 25% last year, about the same levels seen across the state, some experts say the biggest threat is still to come.

"That's wildfires," said winemaker and viticulturist Dr. Wade Wolf.

Washington saw the most fires in a decade with 1,191 DNR fires last year, according to the Washington State Department of Natural Resources.

"And they're getting closer to us," he said, adding the result is a smoke taint in the wine, which gives off an ashtray- or cigar-type character.

With the wine market pumping \$8 billion into Washington's economy, smoke taint is a problem scientists are racing to solve. Last fall, Washington State University announced it was part of a \$7.6 million grant to study smoke taint and its impact on wine, teaming up with scientists along the West Coast.

"There were fires in California, Oregon, and Washington going on simultaneously," said Dr. Wolfe.

But that research is new and it could take time for researchers to find long-term solutions.

	In the meantime, the goal remains to adapt quickly to mitigate the damages caused by climate change while still producing a quality commercial crop.
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HEADLINE	02/23 Rental rates skyrocketing in Seattle
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/rental-rates-skyrocketing-seattle-expected-keep-rising/L2D7RJV75BH4XAHJGATHYLS5DA/
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — As rental rates are skyrocketing across the country, Seattle is no exception.</p> <p>According to Redfin, nationwide, average monthly rent is \$1,891 — a 15% increase over last year.</p> <p>In Seattle, rents are up 29% more, with an average month’s rent at \$2,774.</p> <p>So what’s driving up that number? The demand to live in Seattle, which is fueled by high-salary job growth.</p> <p>That demand, combined with a market saturated with new, luxury apartments, a lack of affordable housing options, and rising mortgage rates that turn would-be buyers into renters, has made rates continue to rise.</p> <p>“I think that this is probably the worst of it fingers crossed, but rents are going to rise. They rise every year and this is a particularly noteworthy year** and I think they’re going to continue to rise going forward</p> <p>I think that this is probably the worst of it — fingers crossed — but rents are going to rise. They rise every year, and this is a particularly noteworthy year. I think they’re going to continue to rise going forward,” said Daryl Fairweather, chief economist at Redfin.</p> <p>As rates continue to rise, some renters can’t keep up with the increases and cities outside Seattle are feeling the effect.</p> <p>“A lot of people are just being priced out and having to move to more far-flung areas, and in turn, are driving up rents in those far-flung areas,” said Fairweather.</p> <p>According to data from Apartment List, in Seattle, a one-bedroom apartment rents for about \$1,650. A two-bedroom rents for a little over \$2,000.</p> <p>For those renting in Tacoma, the savings are only about \$400.</p> <p>Fairweather said the solution comes down to building more affordable rental options, but in the immediate future, budgeting and moving far from metropolitan areas may be the best bet.</p> <p>While Fairweather said she expects rent prices to keep going up, she hopes the large price increases will slow down in the second half of the year.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/23 Seattle breaks record low temperature
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/bitter-cold-temperatures-continue-with-temps-teens-20s/US2BM2ZO3ZDWHDOVBVBJ7QBLFOY/
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — As parts of the Puget Sound region dip into record low temperatures, icy roads and the safety of pets and people are a concern.</p> <p>The National weather service said Wednesday was forecast to be one of the coldest February days on record. The record low for Seattle was 24 degrees in 2018. At 7 a.m., it was 23 degrees in Seattle.</p>

Over the last 24 hours, flurries and occasional snow have been spotted in various parts of Thurston and Pierce counties.

Crews in Pierce County have been working from midnight to 4 a.m., spreading salt and de-icer on highways to prepare the icy roads for morning commuters.

The cold weather could maintain the tough conditions on secondary roads, where compact snow and ice have built up.

The freezing temperatures can be dangerous and cause damage. The National Weather Service is reminding people to dress in layers, cover exposed skin and limit time outside. In addition, pets should not be left outside during the subfreezing temperatures and products put down on slippery sidewalks may not be pet-friendly, so owners should wash off their dogs' paws when they return home from a walk.

Warming shelters have opened across the region for people who don't have a place to get out of the cold.

Plumbers are also going into high gear to try to fix pipes that burst during the freeze-thaw cycle.

"Keep the cabinets open and let some room temperature in, that helps. And the other thing you can do with piping on the exterior wall is just leave the faucet dripping," said plumber Brent Bates.

Forecast

Snow flurries from high clouds could make a brief appearance late Wednesday night and early Thursday, but there won't be any impact expected from that, and by daybreak, any flurries should be gone, Anderson said.

Thursday morning will be subfreezing once again but mainly in the 20s — about a 5 degree improvement.

Highs on Thursday will be in the low 40s with some sun.

Friday should be mainly sunny with morning lows in the 20s to near 30, and highs in the mid to upper 40s.

Clouds will increase on Saturday ahead of another period of unsettled weather but temperatures will have moderated back to near normal with highs in the 40s to near 50.

Some rain moves in Saturday night and continues on and off well into next week. The wettest days look to be Sunday and Monday.

Snow levels should be in the 3,000 to 4,000 foot range — good for decent snow at the passes and resorts except sometimes mixed with rain at Snoqualmie Pass.

Early outlooks for mountain snow Sunday through next Wednesday are in the 1- to -2-foot range, though occurring over a long enough time period to prevent major travel issues at the passes.

Overall, it's good news for skiers and snowboarders while we get some good soaking rain in the lowlands without the threat of snow.

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HEADLINE	02/23 Seattle outdoor dining program thru 2023
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/seattle-extends-outdoor-dining-program-through-2023/MJWCHFANMVBH3CCJQTKGPXXQSI/
GIST	SEATTLE — Outdoor dining is sticking around a while longer. The Seattle Department of Transportation is extending its outdoor retail and dining program through Jan. 31, 2023.

	<p>The temporary Safe Start program was originally set to expire May 31, 2022.</p> <p>“As the pandemic continues, furthering Safe Start permits means continuing to provide an important tool for supporting Seattle’s small businesses, keeping communities healthy, and creating a future that is vibrant, welcoming, and flourishing for all neighbors,” Seattle Mayor Bruce Harrell said.</p> <p>SDOT says more than 250 businesses have participated in the program. The permits include outdoor cafes, retail merchandise displays, food trucks, vending carts and community street closures.</p> <p>The department simplified the process and waived permit application fees.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/23 King Co. areas face larger property tax bills
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/some-king-county-communities-will-have-much-larger-property-tax-bills-this-year
GIST	<p>If you live in King County, you could see a much larger property tax bill, depending on where you live.</p> <p>For communities like Tukwila and Kent, that means a double-digit increase.</p> <p>Nham Pham has lived in Kent for more than two decades and said even though he expected a higher property tax bill he was surprised to hear it’s going to be nearly 13 percent this year.</p> <p>“That’s a lot, especially, a lot of our income don’t go up,” Pham said. “I mean, even if you go to the grocery right now, everything is going up, the gasoline going up.”</p> <p>Kent is one several King County cities seeing a double-digit property tax hike.</p> <p>The county assessors’ office said this is largely due to school levies on the ballot last year. Here in Kent, there were three people voted for.</p> <p>“Remember, roughly 57 percent of your property taxes go towards K-12 education and also a large part of that is in voter approved measures,” said John Wilson, King County Assessor.</p> <p>The same goes for Tukwila, where homeowners will see about a 15 percent jump. Last year, there were three school measures people voted for.</p> <p>Nathaniel Hunter has lived here for eight years and was in favor of voter approved levies for a long time, but feels differently after learning about this years property tax hike.</p> <p>“I think it’s ridiculous,” Hunter said. “They are just going to milk us for any penny we have until people here can no longer afford to live here.”</p> <p>While other parts of King County didn’t see a drastic jump in property taxes, that may not be the case next year.</p> <p>“If you’re in one of those communities that either voted for an enhancement level or capital bond project, you’ll see that reflected in your 23 taxes,” Wilson said.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/24 Oil over \$100/barrel; Asia stocks fall
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/24/business/economy/stock-market-today.html
GIST	<p>The price of oil jumped above \$100 a barrel for the first time since 2014, European natural gas futures jumped 31 percent, and Asian stocks fell on Thursday as Russia launched an invasion of Ukraine, extending market turmoil in the United States and Europe that had been driven by fears of a full-scale attack.</p>

Wall Street was poised for a slide when trading begins, with futures pointing to a 2 percent drop in the S&P 500.

Japan's Nikkei 225 was off just over 2.1 percent by early afternoon. In Hong Kong, the Hang Seng Index fell by 3.1 percent, while the Kospi composite index in South Korea was down 2.7 percent.

The price of Brent crude oil, the global benchmark, rose more than 6 percent to nearly \$103 a barrel.

Dutch front-month gas futures, a European benchmark for natural gas, jumped 31 percent when trading started, to about 116 euros a megawatt-hour. Russia provides more than a third of the European Union's gas, with some of it running through pipelines in Ukraine.

Global markets had broadly been souring in recent days. The Stoxx Europe 600 reversed early gains to fall 0.3 percent on Wednesday. The S&P 500 notched its fourth consecutive day of losses, losing 1.8 percent and sliding deeper into correction territory — a drop of more than 10 percent from a recent high. It is now 11.9 percent off its Jan. 3 peak.

[The news from Ukraine turned increasingly dire](#) on Thursday. The Russian president, Vladimir V. Putin, ordered the start of a “special military operation,” and Ukraine's government confirmed that several cities were under attack. Cyberattacks also knocked out government institutions in Ukraine.

Moscow's stock exchange halted trading, and the ruble fell to a record low against major currencies.

A full-scale invasion could have broad effects on commodities, including oil, natural gas, wheat and metals. Europe is hugely reliant on Russia for energy, and parts of the Middle East and Africa receive most of their wheat from Russia and Ukraine. Even if supply chains remain intact and Russia's exports are not affected by sanctions, there are concerns that Mr. Putin could punitively cut off supplies.

Few of Russia's exports head directly to the United States, but disruptions anywhere could drive up prices, prolonging the inflation that already has dragged on longer than officials had anticipated. The Federal Reserve has indicated it is preparing to raise interest rates, aiming to slow inflation by slowing spending, giving supply time to catch up. But higher rates will also dampen growth, and doing so while the markets are already declining risks prolonging the downturn.

U.S. stocks had been flirting with a correction for weeks, as investors fretted over how quickly the Federal Reserve would raise rates. The S&P 500, the U.S. benchmark, had fallen past the 10 percent threshold multiple times in intraday trading but had risen by the end of trading. Technology stocks in particular have fallen far off their highs, and the tech-heavy Nasdaq composite is 18.8 percent below its November record. It is nearing a drop that indicates an even worse change in sentiment on Wall Street: a bear market, or a decline of 20 percent.

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HEADLINE	02/23 DOH: 1,414,222 cases, 11,732 deaths
SOURCE	https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/coronavirus/article258665143.html
GIST	<p>The Washington state Department of Health reported 3,185 new COVID-19 cases Wednesday. The state reported 737 new cases on Tuesday, 984 on Monday, 4,592 on Sunday and 3,205 on Saturday.</p> <p>As of Wednesday, the state's preliminary death tally was 11,732. That number is up by 117 since Friday. The confirmed death tally as of Feb. 5 was 11,394.</p> <p>The statewide case total from the illness caused by the coronavirus stood at 1,414,222 cases on Wednesday.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/23 Justice Dept. shuts China Initiative: redo
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/02/23/china-initiative-redo/
GIST	<p>The Justice Department is shuttering its controversial China Initiative and replacing it with a broader strategy aimed at countering espionage, cyberattacks and other threats posed by a range of countries, a top official said Wednesday.</p> <p>Assistant Attorney General Matthew G. Olsen, who heads the department's national security division, said the move was spurred by a growing recognition that the initiative's name and approach unintentionally fueled a "harmful perception" that the program unjustly targeted ethnic Chinese for prosecution.</p> <p>"I want to emphasize my belief," he said in a speech at George Mason University in Northern Virginia, just outside Washington, "that the department's actions have been driven by genuine national security concerns. But by grouping cases under the China Initiative rubric, we helped to" create a misperception.</p> <p>"It's important to end that perception," Olsen, who undertook a review of the program in November at the direction of Attorney General Merrick Garland, said in remarks to reporters before the speech. "By picking one country, what the China Initiative did is it created in some ways a bit of a myopic approach, which I don't think really reflects the nature of the threat landscape."</p> <p>The initiative, unveiled in 2018 to great fanfare, was intended to counter a rising tide of Chinese economic espionage, cybertheft and influence operations. Some lawmakers and civil liberties groups have criticized the prosecution of academics — often of Chinese descent — who allegedly did not disclose ties to Chinese institutions while applying for federal grants. Their complaints, including that the department was engaging in racial profiling, took on added urgency as some cases failed and as anti-Asian hate incidents mounted within the United States.</p> <p>On Wednesday, Olsen stressed that the national security threat posed by the Chinese government remains as great as ever. But he also made clear that other countries pose similar challenges.</p> <p>"I have concluded that this [China] initiative is not the right approach to meet the threat in the coming years," Olsen said. "Instead, the current threats demand a broader approach."</p> <p>The revamped approach means the Justice Department's China Initiative webpage will be archived as of Wednesday, officials said. The prosecutions and investigations in the pipeline will continue. But officials said they expect increased transparency by academics and greater oversight by the Justice Department to result in a reduction in the number of cases brought over alleged grant fraud by academics with links to China — an area of inquiry that has resulted in some high-profile losses over the past year.</p> <p>The decision to reorient around nation-state challenges reflects how the perceived threat landscape for the United States has evolved since 2006, when Olsen first served at the newly created division. Back then, the principal danger, and the division's primary focus, was foreign terrorism.</p> <p>Olsen left the division in 2009. What struck him upon his return last year, he said, is how the landscape has broadened to include transnational repression, economic espionage and cyberattacks. "Even compared to just a few years ago, we are seeing nations such as Russia, China, Iran and North Korea become more aggressive, more brazen and more capable in their nefarious activity than ever before," he said in announcing a new "Strategy for Countering Nation-State Threats."</p> <p>Lawmakers and advocacy groups met with Olsen in the weeks before he made his decision to end the initiative, welcomed the news. Rep. Judy Chu (D-Calif.), chair of the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus, welcomed the change. "I especially appreciate the acknowledgement of the harm that this program caused to our communities and the willingness to adapt the department's work to focus on economic espionage cases in a holistic way that does not rely on race or ethnicity," Chu said.</p> <p>The China Initiative was launched during the Trump administration by then-Attorney General Jeff Sessions. The announcement was accompanied by the unveiling of a major indictment against a Chinese</p>

state-owned company, a Taiwan company and three individuals charged with stealing trade secrets of an American semiconductor firm, Micron.

Prosecutors racked up convictions, including of a Chinese intelligence officer on charges of economic espionage and, in January, of a Chinese national for conspiring to steal proprietary technology from Monsanto, a major agricultural biotechnology company.

The dozens of indictments included charges against nine individuals accused of acting as illegal agents of the Chinese government to harass and stalk U.S. residents of Chinese descent to coerce them to return to China. In 2018, the Justice Department indicted two alleged Chinese hackers in connection with a 12-year-long campaign of cyber-intrusions that vacuumed up technology and trade secrets from corporate computers in a dozen countries. It also indicted the Chinese firm Huawei, the world's largest maker of telecommunications equipment, for allegedly conspiring to steal American trade secrets.

These cases coincided with a growing awareness in Congress and the national security community of the Chinese government's increasing aggressiveness in competing with the West economically and technologically. Some 80 percent of all U.S. federal prosecutions of economic espionage involved allegations of theft that would benefit the Chinese state, the department has said.

FBI Director Christopher A. Wray said last month that the bureau is working more than 2,000 investigations of Chinese technology and intellectual property theft and is opening a new case about every 12 hours. "There's just no country that presents a broader threat to our ideas, innovation and economic security than China," he said.

Officials including Wray have said that the Chinese government uses "nontraditional" means of stealing Western technology, including through co-opting academics at American universities. Increasingly over the years the FBI opened cases investigating researchers who had links to Chinese government "talent" programs that allegedly paid academics to secretly share technology with the government. The academics were often accused of failing to disclose those ties on grant applications.

But a number of those prosecutions fell apart, resulting in dismissals or acquittals. In September, University of Tennessee professor Anming Hu was acquitted of fraud and espionage. Last month, Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor Gang Chen's case was dismissed after the government acknowledged it could not meet its burden of proof at trial.

Though the department did obtain a number of convictions, including of Harvard University professor Charles Lieber in December, the dismissals fueled criticism that the cases were motivated by ethnic bias or that the department applied a lower standard to bring them.

Olsen said he is convinced that neither criticism is justified.

Moving forward, Olsen said, the division will exercise more supervision over grant fraud cases and will work with the FBI and other investigative agencies to ensure that criminal prosecutions are brought only when there is clear evidence of intentional misconduct; "materiality," meaning the researcher would not have received the grant if he or she had disclosed a link to China; and a nexus to national or economic security. In other cases, he said, civil or administrative remedies might be more appropriate.

He noted that the White House Office of Science and Technology in January issued guidance to federal funding agencies directing them to craft within 120 days uniform and clear disclosure guidelines for researchers.

In retrospect, the blowback provoked by the initiative's name appears to have been an unintended outcome of a desire to publicize the threat posed by Beijing and the department's work to counter it.

In fact, the national security division for years had put a major focus on Chinese economic espionage, cyber-intrusions and influence operations. In May 2014, in a bellwether case, prosecutors obtained an

	<p>indictment of five Chinese military hackers accused of stealing valuable trade secrets from leading steel, nuclear-plant and solar-power companies, marking the first time that the United States had leveled such criminal charges against a foreign country. More cases followed.</p> <p>So when Sessions launched the initiative in 2018, “my first impression was that it was a gimmick to create a classic DOJ moniker” to bring more public attention to the effort, said David Laufman, who from 2014 to early 2018 headed the division’s counterintelligence and export control section. “I was surprised because it seemed to me we were already administering a China initiative, and we just hadn’t named it.”</p> <p>Over time, Laufman said, he worried the name “caused apprehension in the Asian American community and concerns that it was racial profiling.” Like Olsen, he said there was no evidence that prosecutors were motivated by bias.</p> <p>Dropping the name, Laufman added, won’t “make one whit of difference in the intensity brought to bear” by the department in countering malign foreign activities that threaten national security.</p> <p>Olsen said that to the extent the Justice Department trains its sights on Beijing, it focuses on actions by the Chinese government, Communist Party and their agents — “not the Chinese people and not Chinese Americans.”</p>
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HEADLINE	02/23 Bellevue appoints interim as new PD chief
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/eastside/bellevue-appoints-interim-police-chief-as-departments-new-leader/
GIST	<p>Bellevue has appointed interim police Chief Wendell Shirley as the police department’s new leader.</p> <p>Shirley has served as the department’s interim chief since August 2021, after Chief Steve Mylett left the position to become police chief in Akron, Ohio. Before that, Shirley had served as Bellevue assistant police chief and spent two decades with the Santa Monica, California, police department.</p> <p>Shirley is the first person of color to lead the department, city officials said Wednesday in a news release announcing his appointment. He was appointed by City Manager Brad Miyake, who said Shirley has the leadership skills and dedication needed to be the department leader.</p> <p>Shirley’s yearly salary is \$203,055, city spokesperson Brad Harwood said, and he’ll oversee a department with 184 commissioned officers and 41 noncommission employees.</p> <p>The Los Angeles native retired as captain from the Santa Monica department in 2019 but came out of retirement to serve as Bellevue’s assistant police chief. He said at the time he thought he could be of value in the department amid a national reckoning over policing that began in 2020, sparked by the murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/23 WA \$3.75M settlement; DOC wrongful-death
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/law-justice/wa-to-pay-3-75m-for-death-of-man-whose-cancer-went-untreated-in-prison/
GIST	<p>Washington state will pay \$3.75 million to settle a wrongful-death lawsuit brought by the family of a man who died at Monroe Correctional Complex after his cancer went untreated despite repeated pleas.</p> <p>Kenny Williams, 63, died in June 2019 of breast cancer that had spread to his bones. If he’d received chemotherapy, as recommended by an oncologist, he’d likely have lived to his release date last fall, according to the lawsuit.</p>

Instead, as documented in a scathing [November 2019 prison watchdog report](#), efforts by Williams and his family to obtain treatment were frustrated by a confused and at times coldly indifferent DOC bureaucracy, delaying proper care until it was too late.

In agreeing to the settlement, finalized last week, the DOC admitted its medical care failures “more likely than not” caused Williams’ suffering and death.

“The DOC failed. It has repeatedly failed. It has paid millions to settle cases that could have been avoided with competent and decent care, and it should take this case as an opportunity to look deep within itself and consider what it needs to do to avoid further travesties like this,” said Ed Budge, an attorney with the Seattle law firm Budge & Heipt, which [filed the lawsuit last April](#) on behalf of Williams’ estate.

The settlement money will benefit Williams’ widow, Dee Williams, and their four children.

Jacque Coe, a DOC spokesperson, said in an email the agency would have no comment on the settlement.

The DOC previously has pointed to systemwide health care policy and training changes aimed at improving medical care at state prisons since Williams’ death.

The new settlement is the latest in a series of investigations, lawsuits and payouts caused by poor medical care in state prisons.

Admitting negligence, the DOC last year [paid \\$3.25 million](#) to the family of a man who died in 2019 of a festering abdominal wound that was not properly treated at the Monroe prison. In 2020, the state paid a \$400,000 settlement in the death of a man whose cancer went untreated at the same prison, despite filing written grievances seeking attention.

The medical director at the Monroe prison, Julia Barnett, was [fired for misconduct in 2019](#) after a DOC investigation found she’d provided or supervised inadequate care for incarcerated people, including at least three who died. Her medical license has been [indefinitely suspended](#) by state regulators.

A bearded, burly man, Williams was a talented musician who wrote songs, sang and played a Fender Stratocaster guitar in bands, including the [Crazy Texas Gypsies](#).

Williams went to prison after pleading guilty in 2016 to two counts of second-degree assault for shooting a man after a night of drinking in Kent.

In May of 2018, a nurse discovered a lump in Williams’ left breast. But no follow-up examination was scheduled, even though Williams had a family history of breast cancer.

Within a few months, he was describing stabbing pain and a DOC medical staffer urgently recommended scans, according to the lawsuit. Nothing happened for a month.

The department waited nearly six months to arrange for Williams to be seen by an oncologist, according to the lawsuit and the 2019 report by the [Office of the Corrections Ombuds](#), which investigates complaints by incarcerated people and their families. The oncologist said in August 2018 that Williams need to start chemotherapy immediately.

But he never received treatment, and prison officials sloughed off his written appeals for help. “I am dying. What is holding up the treatment that will save my life?” he wrote in one. A DOC grievance counselor responded by telling Williams his appeal was not properly signed and dated.

By November 2018, it was too late. The cancer had spread throughout Williams’ body and metastasized to his bones. Wracked by pain, he signed a form seeking only palliative care. He died June 12, 2019.

	<p>A breast cancer expert's report commissioned by Williams' lawyers said the pain and suffering from breast cancer "is among the most severe of any disease" and that it could have been avoided.</p> <p>"With appropriate care, Mr. Williams' life would have been prolonged for some years, and it is very likely that he might have returned to the life expectancy he would have had if the cancer had never occurred," the report stated.</p> <p>In part due to the ombuds probe, the basic facts in the case were never under dispute, and it could have been settled long ago, said attorney Hank Balson, who co-represented the Williams' estate.</p> <p>"For me one of the most frustrating parts of this case was DOC's intransigence and its refusal to take action earlier on," Balson said. "Instead, it chose to put the family through 10 months of litigation."</p>
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HEADLINE	02/23 Seattle FD probe: noose in fire station
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/law-justice/seattle-fire-department-investigating-after-noose-found-in-fire-station/
GIST	<p>The Seattle Fire Department has launched an investigation following the discovery of a noose inside a fire station in the Bitter Lake neighborhood.</p> <p>A firefighter found a "rope tied in a noose" last week, which was brought to the attention of supervisors, according to department spokesperson Kristin Tinsley, who said SFD is working with the city attorney's office and has hired an independent investigator.</p> <p>"Discrimination and racial harassment are antithetical to SFD's values and will not be tolerated," Tinsley said in a statement Wednesday. "The department takes any complaints of discrimination and harassment very seriously and will use all appropriate measures to address any violations of policy."</p> <p>Tinsley declined to share any additional details about the incident to "maintain the integrity of the investigative process." The investigation was first reported by The Stranger.</p> <p>In a Feb. 18 email to department staff and firefighters, Seattle Fire Chief Harold Scoggins said he was "dismayed," the incident occurred during Black History Month and that nooses have an "undeniable history in our nation as a symbol of racial hate and intimidation and historically has been used to murder Black people," according to a copy of the email obtained through a public records request.</p> <p>Scoggins also acknowledged Seattle Fire Station 24 is the same station that had "inadvertently" used an "old patch with racist iconography" in its 2020 yearbook. Regardless of the intent, Scoggins said "there is no circumstance in which it could reasonably be considered innocent or appropriate."</p> <p>"I want to commend the firefighter for the courage to report what they found and the officer for making sure this was brought to SFD leadership," Scoggins wrote. "I also wish to acknowledge how this affects our Black firefighters and professional staff. I see you, and I understand."</p>
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HEADLINE	02/24 Russia attacks Ukraine; warns US, NATO
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-putin-attack-a05e7c4563ac94b963134bba83187d46
GIST	<p>MOSCOW (AP) — Russian troops launched a wide-ranging attack on Ukraine on Thursday, as President Vladimir Putin cast aside international condemnation and sanctions and warned other countries that any attempt to interfere would lead to "consequences you have never seen."</p> <p>Big explosions were heard before dawn in Kyiv, Kharkiv and Odesa as world leaders decried the start of an invasion that could cause massive casualties, topple Ukraine's democratically elected government and threaten the post-Cold War balance on the continent.</p>

Ukrainians started fleeing some cities, and the Russian military claimed to have incapacitated all of Ukraine's air defenses and air bases within hours.

President Volodymyr Zelenskyy declared martial law, saying Russia has targeted Ukraine's military infrastructure. Ukrainians who had long braced for the prospect of an assault, while never knowing precisely when it would come, were urged to stay home and not to panic even as the country's border guard agency reported an artillery barrage by Russian troops from neighboring Belarus.

President Joe Biden pledged new sanctions to punish Russia for the aggression that the international community had expected for weeks but could not prevent through diplomacy.

Putin justified it all in a televised address, asserting that the attack was needed to protect civilians in eastern Ukraine — a false claim the U.S. had predicted he would make as a pretext for an invasion. He accused the U.S. and its allies of ignoring Russia's demands to prevent Ukraine from joining NATO and for security guarantees. He also claimed that Russia does not intend to occupy Ukraine but will move to "demilitarize" it and bring those who committed crimes to justice.

Biden in a written statement condemned the "unprovoked and unjustified attack," and he promised that the U.S. and its allies would "hold Russia accountable." The president said he planned to speak to Americans on Thursday after a meeting of the Group of Seven leaders. More sanctions against Russia were expected to be announced Thursday.

Ukraine's Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba described the assault as a "full-scale invasion" and said Ukraine will "defend itself and will win. The world can and must stop Putin. The time to act is now."

In the capital, Kyiv Mayor Vitaly Klitschko advised residents to stay home unless they are involved in critical work and urged them to prepare go-bags with necessities and documents if they need to evacuate. An Associated Press photographer in Mariupol reported hearing explosions and seeing dozens of people with suitcases heading for their cars to leave the city.

"We are facing a war and horror. What could be worse?" 64-year-old Liudmila Gireyeva said in Kyiv. She planned to head to the western city of Lviv and then to try to move to Poland to join her daughter. Putin "will be damned by history, and Ukrainians are damning him."

The Russian claims about knocking out Ukrainian air defenses and Ukrainian claims to have shot down several Russian aircraft could not immediately be verified. The Ukrainian air defense system and air force date back to the Soviet era and are dwarfed by Russia's massive air power and its inventory of precision weapons.

The Russian Defense Ministry said it was not targeting cities, but using precision weapons and claimed that "there is no threat to civilian population."

Anton Gerashchenko, an adviser to Ukraine's interior minister, said on Facebook that the Russian military had launched missile strikes on Ukrainian military command facilities, air bases and military depots in Kyiv, Kharkiv and Dnipro.

After the initial explosions in Kyiv, people could be heard shouting in the streets. Then a sense of normality returned, with cars circulating and people walking in the streets as a pre-dawn commute appeared to start in relative calm.

The consequences of the conflict and resulting sanctions on Russia could reverberate throughout the world, upending geopolitical dynamics in Europe as well as affecting energy supplies in Europe and jolting global financial markets.

Asian stock markets plunged and oil prices surged as the attack began. Earlier, Wall Street's benchmark S&P 500 index fell 1.8% to an eight-month low after the Kremlin said rebels in eastern Ukraine asked for military assistance.

Anticipating international condemnation and countermeasures, Putin issued a stark warning to other countries not to meddle, saying, "whoever tries to impede us, let alone create threats for our country and its people, must know that the Russian response will be immediate and lead to the consequences you have never seen in history."

Putin urged Ukrainian servicemen to "immediately put down arms and go home."

In a stark reminder of Russia's nuclear power, Putin warned that "no one should have any doubts that a direct attack on our country will lead to the destruction and horrible consequences for any potential aggressor." He emphasized that Russia is "one of the most potent nuclear powers and also has a certain edge in a range of state-of-the-art weapons."

Though the U.S. on Tuesday announced the repositioning of forces around the Baltics, Biden has said he will not send in troops to fight Russia.

Putin announced the military operation after the Kremlin said rebels in eastern Ukraine asked Russia for military assistance to help fend off Ukrainian "aggression," an announcement that the White House said was a "false flag" operation by Moscow to offer up a pretext for an invasion.

Putin's announcement came just hours after the Ukrainian president rejected Moscow's claims that his country poses a threat to Russia and made a passionate, last-minute plea for peace.

"The people of Ukraine and the government of Ukraine want peace," Zelenskyy said in an emotional overnight address, speaking in Russian in a direct appeal to Russian citizens. "But if we come under attack, if we face an attempt to take away our country, our freedom, our lives and lives of our children, we will defend ourselves. When you attack us, you will see our faces, not our backs."

Zelenskyy said he asked to arrange a call with Putin late Wednesday, but the Kremlin did not respond.

In an apparent reference to Putin's move to authorize the deployment of the Russian military to "maintain peace" in eastern Ukraine, Zelensky warned that "this step could mark the start of a big war on the European continent."

"Any provocation, any spark could trigger a blaze that will destroy everything," he said.

He challenged the Russian propaganda claims, saying that "you are told that this blaze will bring freedom to the people of Ukraine, but the Ukrainian people are free."

At an emergency meeting of the U.N. Security Council called by Ukraine because of the imminent threat of a Russian invasion, members still unaware of Putin's announcement appealed to him to stop an attack. U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres opened the meeting, just before the announcement, telling Putin: "Stop your troops from attacking Ukraine. Give peace a chance. Too many people have already died."

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg issued a statement condemning "Russia's reckless and unprovoked attack on Ukraine, which puts at risk countless civilian lives. Once again, despite our repeated warnings and tireless efforts to engage in diplomacy, Russia has chosen the path of aggression against a sovereign and independent country."

European Council President Charles Michel and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen promised to hold the Kremlin accountable.

	<p>“In these dark hours, our thoughts are with Ukraine and the innocent women, men and children as they face this unprovoked attack and fear for their lives,” they said on Twitter.</p> <p>Even before Putin’s announcement, dozens of nations imposed sanctions on Russia, further squeezing Russian oligarchs and banks out of international markets.</p> <p>The Russian Foreign Ministry has shrugged off the sanctions, saying that “Russia has proven that, with all the costs of the sanctions, it is able to minimize the damage.”</p> <p>The threat of war has already shredded Ukraine’s economy and raised the specter of massive casualties, energy shortages across Europe and global economic chaos.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/23 Wintry weather disrupts travel central US
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/storms-dallas-weather-accidents-missouri-9caa428a2bc1993685903d1da62401dd
GIST	<p>DALLAS (AP) — Freezing rain and drizzle is disrupting travel from Central Texas to the Great Lakes, with ice-glazed roads leading to hundreds of traffic accidents.</p> <p>Hundreds of flights were canceled Wednesday at Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport as freezing rain iced parts of Texas, Oklahoma, Missouri and Arkansas braced for an ice storm.</p> <p>More than half an inch of ice could accumulate in parts of the Ozarks through Friday morning, while a quarter- to a half-inch was expected in North Texas through Thursday, the National Weather Service said.</p> <p>Airlines had canceled more than 2,000 Thursday flights by Wednesday night, according to the FlightAware.com tracking site. About half of them were at the Dallas-Fort Worth airport, where temperatures were expected to top out above freezing only briefly late Thursday afternoon.</p> <p>DFW Airport is the biggest in the American Airlines network, and American had canceled 21% of its Thursday flights by Wednesday night, according to FlightAware.</p> <p>Meanwhile, heavy snow was expected in upstate New York and New England later this week, with more than 8 inches (20 centimeters) possible through Saturday morning.</p> <p>Winter took a fleeting break in the Northeast on Wednesday, with temperatures soaring into the 60s before they were expected to plunge within hours.</p> <p>The warm spell sent people streaming outdoors, but it was bad news for ski areas and other winter sports.</p> <p>“It’s not exactly what you want to see in the middle of the busiest week of the year,” said Ethan Austin, spokesperson for the Sugarloaf ski area in Maine, which was busy because of school vacation week. But he was happy to hear snow was on the way.</p> <p>The weather whiplash marked the second time in less than a week that there was to be a temperature swing of more than 40 degrees in 24 hours.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/23 Vaccination drive bottoming out
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-health-us-news-alabama-4c0026679a346ea83a6a04f475a518ef
GIST	<p>HAMILTON, Ala. (AP) — A handwritten log kept by nurses tells the story of the losing battle to get more people vaccinated against COVID-19 in this corner of Alabama: Just 14 people showed up at the Marion County Health Department for their initial shot during the first six weeks of the year.</p>

That was true even as hospitals in and around the county of roughly 30,000 people filled with virus patients and the death toll climbed. On many days, no one got a first shot at all, while a Mexican restaurant up the street, Los Amigos, was full of unmasked diners at lunchtime.

The vaccination drive in the U.S. is grinding to a halt, and demand has all but collapsed in places like this deeply conservative manufacturing town where many weren't interested in the shots to begin with.

The average number of Americans getting their first shot is down to about 90,000 a day, the lowest point since the first few days of the U.S. vaccination campaign, in December 2020. And hopes of any substantial improvement in the immediate future have largely evaporated.

About 76% of the U.S. population has received at least one shot. Less than 65% of all Americans are fully vaccinated.

Vaccination incentive programs that gave away cash, sports tickets, beer and other prizes have largely gone away. Government and employer vaccine mandates have faced court challenges and may have gone as far as they ever will.

And with [COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations and deaths subsiding](#) across the U.S., people who are against getting vaccinated don't see much reason to change their minds.

"People are just over it. They're tired of it," said Judy Smith, administrator for a 12-county public health district in northwestern Alabama.

The bottoming-out of demand for the first round of vaccinations is especially evident in conservative areas around the country.

On most days in Idaho, the number of people statewide getting their first shot rarely surpasses 500.

In Wyoming, a total of about 280 people statewide got their first shot in the past week, and the waiting area at the Cheyenne-Laramie County Health Department stood empty Tuesday morning. The head of the department fondly recalled just a few months ago, when the lobby was bustling on Friday afternoons after school with children getting their doses. But they aren't showing up anymore either.

"People heard more stories about, well, the omicron's not that bad," Executive Director Kathy Emmons said. "I think a lot of people just kind of rolled the dice and decided, 'Well, if it's not that bad, I'm just going to kind of wait it out and see what happens.'"

Marion County, along the Mississippi line, is part of a band of Alabama counties where most people aren't fully vaccinated more than a year after shots were rolled out. Just to the east, Winston County has the state's lowest share of fully vaccinated residents, at 26%, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. About 42% are fully immunized in Marion County.

The digital sign outside First National Bank flashes Bible verses along with the temperature, and many Marion County residents work in small plants that make mobile homes and components for prefab housing. Most area jobs are blue-collar, and TVs are typically turned to Fox News. A conservative, working-class ethic runs deep.

The area went heavily for President Donald Trump in the 2020 election. And yet resistance to the vaccine is so strong that two counties over, in Cullman, some booed Trump when he encouraged vaccinations during a rally that drew thousands last summer.

COVID-19 has killed almost 18,000 people in Alabama, giving the state the nation's fourth-highest rate of deaths relative to population. Marion County's rate exceeds the state average at 1.78%, with more than 140 deaths, according to data from Johns Hopkins University.

Health officials expected to have a hard time persuading Black people to get government-sponsored vaccines in Alabama, home of the infamous Tuskegee syphilis study and a place where distrust of Washington runs deep. They started work on public education campaigns weeks early in mostly Black areas, which now have some of the state's highest vaccination rates, at 60% or more.

But they didn't expect the stiff resistance among rural whites that has kept vaccination numbers stubbornly low in places like Marion County, which is 94% white. While rural transportation difficulties, confusion over vaccine costs — they're free — and a lack of health care access have also been factors, the partisan divide in America killed the vaccine drive for some before it really got started, officials said.

"Rural white men who identify as conservative are just not interested in this. That caught us off guard," said Dr. Scott Harris, head of the Alabama Department of Public Health. "By the first or second month of the vaccine campaign, it became clear that those folks just weren't going to come in."

Richard Kitchens is among that group. The owner of a clothing and sports shoe shop on the square in Hamilton, Kitchens said he isn't interested in the vaccine after getting COVID-19 in 2020 before vaccines were available and having relatives who contracted the illness, developed only minor symptoms and recovered.

Short of a proven guarantee against illness — which no vaccine provides — he doesn't see the point.

"I guess if I knew I could go out and get a shot and wouldn't get it or spread it, I would go get it, and they say it helps," Kitchens said. "But I think that will be determined sometime down the road maybe."

Doris Peterson is fully vaccinated, but she said she didn't get a booster on the advice of her two adult daughters, neither of whom is vaccinated. Peterson said she is used to being one of the few people around still wearing a mask in public.

"Most of the time I am it," she said.

Kelly Moore, a former Tennessee health official who now heads a CDC-funded vaccination advocacy organization named Immunize.org, recalled seeing data from a recent survey that hit her like a punch to the gut.

The results were presented at a CDC meeting of vaccine experts earlier this month. The January survey of about 1,000 adults asked unvaccinated participants what, if anything, would change their mind and persuade them to get a shot. Half said "nothing."

"It was quite demoralizing to see those results, frankly," Moore said.

With the pandemic still a mortal threat, public health workers haven't given up on getting more people vaccinated, even if it feels like an uphill slog.

Jordan Ledbetter, a nurse who works at the Marion County Health Department, was thrilled when two people came in for first-time shots on the same day recently.

"That was exciting," she said. "There are days when I haven't given any vaccines."

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HEADLINE	02/23 Calif. 'People's Convoy' on the road to DC
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-business-health-canada-california-01004a3ec93de57719137020a58f1284
GIST	ADELANTO, Calif. (AP) — A small convoy of truckers demanding an end to coronavirus mandates began a cross-country drive from California to the Washington, D.C., area on Wednesday.

Several hundred people rallied in a parking lot in the cold, windswept Mojave Desert town of Adelanto before about two dozen trucks and a number of other vehicles hit the road. It wasn't clear how many intended to go all the way.

"To the truck drivers around the world: Now is your time to stand up. Now is your time to usher in a renaissance time of freedom," truck driver and event organizer Brian Brase told the rally. "Do not bow down."

Convoy vehicles carried signs with slogans such as "Legalize freedom" and "Let them breathe."

It was one of several U.S. convoys organized online and modeled on the [recent Canadian truckers' protests](#) that shut down U.S.-Canadian border crossings and besieged the streets of the capital, Ottawa, for weeks. The convoys all have different starting points, departure dates and routes.

A statement issued by organizers of the Adelanto group called it "The People's Convoy" and said it was multicultural and nonpartisan, although there were Trump flags at the rally.

The statement said "COVID is well-in-hand now, and Americans need to get back to work in a free and unrestricted manner."

It pledged a "100% safe, lawful and peaceful journey" that will "terminate in the vicinity of the DC area, but will NOT be going into DC proper." Arrival was scheduled for March 5.

Truck driver Dallas Hughbanks, 61, said his message is freedom of choice, and he specifically noted that he doesn't want to wear a mask.

"We're not gonna be violent," Hughbanks said. "We're not gonna try to block or blockade anything — just doing a convoy and bringing people to awareness."

The Pentagon has approved the deployment of 700 unarmed National Guard troops to the nation's capital as it prepares for multiple trucker convoys. The troops would be used to assist with traffic control during demonstrations expected in the city in the coming days, the Pentagon said.

The protest comes as average daily COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations are continuing to fall in the U.S., an indicator that the omicron variant's hold is weakening across the country, and mandates are being loosened or lifted.

Public health experts say they feel hopeful that more declines are ahead, but many worry U.S. vaccinations remain below expectations, concerns that are exacerbated by the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions.

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HEADLINE	02/23 Veterans struggle after military to find jobs
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/veterans-jobs-american-corporate-partners/
GIST	<p>Major General Dustin "Dusty" Shultz is not leaving the service just yet, but she's already preparing for her career after the military.</p> <p>Shultz, a two-star general for the U.S. Army, told CBS News the transition is "pretty tough."</p> <p>Finding a job after their military service affects nearly 200,000 veterans every year. Only one in four U.S. veterans have a job lined up after leaving the armed forces, according to the Pew Research Center.</p> <p>Shultz, who learned to speak multiple languages over her three decades of service, is looking to add something new to her toolbox — learning how to translate her skills into corporate language.</p>

"Business is a new language, you know? In the military, we have our own terminology. I work in the G-357 and to most people, that doesn't mean much," she said. "But if I tell somebody, you know, 'I work in the operations center of the Army,' that means a lot."

It's just one of the issues service members face when transitioning to civilian life.

A U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation [study](#) from 2016 found that 53% of veterans are unemployed for four months or longer after leaving the military. Veterans who spoke to CBS News cited a lack of resources, underemployment and not having a four-year college degree as some of the obstacles that prevent them from getting a good-paying job.

American Corporate Partners, an organization that assists veterans in finding their post-military purpose through a network of mentors, helped First Sergeant Manny Morejonreyes, who served as a senior aviation leader for more than 20 years, in his job search.

"I really thought that it was going to be a little bit easier to be able to find a job," Morejonreyes told CBS News. "I concentrated my career on giving everything to the military. Most of the job descriptions do require you to have some sort of level of higher education."

Because he didn't have a four-year degree, Morejonreyes said most of his job applications were overlooked before T-Mobile hired him as a Human Resources manager.

Rich Comitz, senior vice president at American Corporate Partners, said mentors help veterans understand how they can convey the skills they learned during their military service on their resumes and in job interviews.

"They've learned some valuable skills from deploying service members overseas, the equipment maintenance, to all these different skills managing teams," Comitz told CBS News. "Oftentimes it's military jargon that they're used to explaining, and they help them translate that into what the industry is looking for in the areas that they're interested in applying to."

The New York City-based nonprofit has two free programs to help veterans: a nationwide mentoring program with more than 100 corporate partners and an online network that offers career and employment advice. More than 22,000 veterans have completed the mentoring program, according to the organization. Veterans have qualities that should make them appealing to private corporations, Morejonreyes and Shultz said.

"The biggest advantage that a lot of veterans have are all those soft skills that most of corporate America takes years to attain — loyalty, integrity, honesty and a great work ethic," he said.

Shultz added, "They have the discipline. Sometimes they have just these phenomenally exquisite skills. And why are we not harnessing that?"

The corporate world is waking up to it, Shultz said.

"We still want to give the best of ourselves, and to be part of something bigger than ourselves," she said.

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HEADLINE	02/24 EU 'harshest' ever sanctions on Russia
SOURCE	https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-russia-new-sanctions-package-ukraine/
GIST	The European Union will block Russia's access to critical technology and other markets as punishment for Russia's decision to invade Ukraine, European President Ursula von der Leyen said Thursday.

Von der Leyen appeared briefly to announce the new measures just hours after Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, sending troops across the border from several directions and bombing targets across the country.

Innocent people, von der Leyen said, “are dying of fear for their lives.”

She vowed the EU would respond forcefully.

“We will target the strategic sectors of the Russian economy by blocking the access to technologies and markets that are key for Russia,” von der Leyen said, reading from a prepared statement. “We will freeze Russian assets in the European Union and stop the access of Russian banks to European financial markets.”

“These sanctions,” she added, “are designed to take a heavy toll on the Kremlin’s interests and their ability to finance war.”

Standing next to von der Leyen, top EU diplomat Josep Borrell promised the penalties would constitute “the harshest package of sanctions we have ever implemented.”

The new penalties will be presented Thursday evening at an emergency summit of EU leaders.

“We will weaken Russia’s economic base and its capacity to modernize,” von der Leyen said.

The punishment will build on an initial raft of penalties the EU approved Wednesday in response to Russia’s initial troop deployment into eastern Ukraine’s contested Donbass region. European Council President Charles Michel called the emergency EU leaders’ summit following that decision.

“Russia’s target is not only Donbass, the target is not only Ukraine,” von der Leyen said. “The target is the stability in Europe. And the whole of the international peace order.”

The first round of EU penalties went after several members of Putin’s inner circle, including his defense minister. It also targeted military commanders, prominent media personalities who trumpet Kremlin talking points, banking executives and state-controlled financial institutions.

The penalties overlapped with others imposed by the U.S. and U.K., while going farther in some areas.

But the EU and its allies have yet to go after a number of more damaging targets, such as Russia’s lucrative energy sector, or its import of key technologies like semiconductors. Also not yet targeted for sanctions is Putin himself.

“These are among the darkest hours for Europe since the end of World War II,” Borrell said.

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HEADLINE	02/24 Russia tanks blitzkrieg attack in Ukraine
SOURCE	https://www.thedailybeast.com/putin-announces-special-military-operation-against-ukraine?ref=home
GIST	<p>Explosions shook Ukraine at the crack of dawn on Thursday after Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.</p> <p>The ultimate scale of the assault, which prompted Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to declare martial law, is still unclear. But with air strikes reported in several cities and troops crossing from Belarus and the East of the country, the stage is set for a wide-ranging, catastrophic war.</p> <p>“Russia conducted strikes on our military infrastructure and our border guards. There were blasts heard in many cities of Ukraine,” Zelensky said in a video statement shortly after smoke clouds began appearing in the sky.</p>

At least 9 Ukrainians were reported dead in the immediate aftermath of the invasion, with another 19 unaccounted for and at least 14 injured. Authorities stressed that those figures were only preliminary.

President Joe Biden immediately slammed Putin, who issued a bloodcurdling warning for the West to keep out of the conflict: “Whoever tries to impede us, let alone create threats for our country and its people, must know that the Russian response will be immediate and lead to the consequences you have never seen in history.”

Shortly after Putin made a surprise 5:40 a.m. appearance on Russian state TV, residents and web cameras captured images of explosions across Ukrainian cities—including the capital of Kyiv—widely expected to be in the target of a potential Russian invasion. In Kharkiv, web cameras captured footage of explosions seen along the horizon in the northern Ukrainian city that lies just an hour south of where satellite imagery had captured imagery of Russian military vehicles poised to move.

“Putin has just launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine,” Dmytro Kuleba, Ukraine’s foreign minister, declared in a tweet. “Peaceful Ukrainian cities are under strikes. This is a war of aggression. Ukraine will defend itself and will win. The world can and must stop Putin. The time to act is now.”

“As soon as Putin declared a war against Ukraine I heard several very loud explosions near Shevchenko park, I believe they fired from the sea,” Odessa resident Boris Khodorkovsky told The Daily Beast. “I can hear our artillery now. We hear that the military storages and bases are under attack. I have two children, my wife’s parents are in Mariupol. I am thinking of how and where to take my family, where we could be safe. Right now it seems the attack is all over the country.”

According to Interfax Ukraine, Russian troops also arrived on the ground in the Ukrainian cities of Odessa and Mariupol. Several airstrike attacks targeting military command posts across the country have also reportedly been carried out.

Putin’s announcement coincided with the United Nations Security Council’s emergency meeting in New York where world leaders decried what they believed was an imminent invasion.

In his speech, Putin attacked so-called Western-supported nationalists in power in Kyiv and called the West an “empire of lies.” He said “a clash with Russia is inevitable” and once again claimed that pro-Russia separatists in Ukraine’s occupied territories had requested military help to repel unspecified Ukrainian aggression.

“Circumstances require us to take decisive and immediate action,” he said.

The address came after a day of rapidly escalating tensions, with the Pentagon warning that Russian troops could invade Ukraine at “any hour” and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky making a last-minute plea for peace as hundreds of thousands of Russian troops amassed on the border.

Biden said he would be monitoring the situation overnight and on Thursday would meet with his G7 counterparts and then address the nation. “Tonight, Jill and I are praying for the brave and proud people of Ukraine,” he said.

“The prayers of the entire world are with the people of Ukraine tonight as they suffer an unprovoked and unjustified attack by Russian military forces,” Biden said in a statement. “President Putin has chosen a premeditated war that will bring a catastrophic loss of life and human suffering. Russia alone is responsible for the death and destruction this attack will bring, and the United States and its Allies and partners will respond in a united and decisive way. The world will hold Russia accountable.”

Alarm bells in the West had reached a deafening pitch this week when Putin formally recognized the separatist leadership of Ukraine’s occupied territories and won approval from lawmakers to deploy troops into the country for a supposed “peacekeeping” mission.

A deeply alarming national address delivered by the Russian president on the eve of that deployment seemed to make clear it was anything but. In the hour-long speech, Putin spouted off a revisionist history according to which Ukraine was “created by Russia” and belittled the Ukrainian identity as “parasitical.”

Almost immediately after the formal recognition, videos emerged of Russian military equipment moving into the occupied territories, and separatist leaders threatened to reclaim land won back by Ukrainian forces in 2014, teeing up a direct military confrontation. Ukrainian authorities soon moved to declare a nationwide state of emergency amid reports of further Russian troop buildups at the border, and Russia's Foreign Ministry pulled personnel from all consular offices in the country.

Despite a flurry of sanctions meant to give Putin one last chance to pull back from a full invasion, Moscow was unfazed, dismissing the sanctions as ineffective and boasting that “Russia has proven it is able to minimize the damage inflicted by all costs of sanctions.”

A new flare-up in violence along the frontline in eastern Ukraine in recent days also seemed to signal imminent trouble as the Kremlin began to echo the same rhetoric about “provocative actions” that it used in the run-up to Moscow’s invasion of Georgia in 2008. Add to that Putin’s bogus claim that Kyiv was committing “genocide” in the war-torn Donbas, and Russia seemed to be brazenly fulfilling the West’s predictions all week of how an invasion would begin with the Kremlin creating a “pretext” for military action.

Western leaders had been bracing for the incursion for weeks, and the situation reached boiling point as U.S. officials warned earlier this month the attack could come at any moment. The U.S. embassy in Kyiv suspended consular services earlier this month and scrambled to evacuate nearly all its staff, while more than a dozen countries urged citizens to leave Ukraine immediately. Authorities in Kyiv confirmed evacuation plans were in place, with residents of the capital to be alerted of an attack by siren and vehicles equipped with loudspeakers. Locations throughout the city were designated to serve as evacuation points, and a string of bomb shelters were readied.

It briefly appeared that there was some hope for de-escalation earlier this month, as Russia’s Defense Ministry announced a partial troop withdrawal from around Ukraine’s borders. That relief was short-lived, however, as Ukrainian authorities, NATO, and U.S. officials said there was no evidence to back up Russia’s words.

The “military operation” announced by Putin on Wednesday is the beginning of the worst nightmare invasion analysts and U.S. intelligence officials have been warning about, Michael Kofman, the research program director in the Russia Studies Program at Virginia-based national security research organization CNA, told The Daily Beast.

“His speech made very clear he was speaking about all of Ukraine. He spoke of demilitarization of Ukraine. And as you can see, airstrikes have begun in Kharkiv and Kyiv area,” said Kofman. “It’s very clear that this is an operation of maximum [effort]. The aim of this operation s going to be regime change.”

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HEADLINE	02/23 Poland lifts most Covid restrictions
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/poland-lifts-covid-19-restrictions-march-masks-stay-83058991
GIST	<p>WASAW, Poland -- Poland is lifting most COVID-19 restrictions including limits on the people inside restaurants and theaters from March 1, but will continue with mandatory face masks indoors and isolation rules, the government said Wednesday.</p> <p>Health Minister Adam Niedzielski said the lifting of most of the restrictions was possible because the number of new daily infections and hospitalizations was falling significantly, and herd immunity was above 90% as a result of both vaccinations and infections.</p>

	<p>Discos and clubs can reopen on Tuesday, and the 50% capacity limit on the number of people on public transport and in malls, restaurants, theaters and sports venues will also be lifted. State and regional administration workers can return to work in the office.</p> <p>Niedzielski said mask-wearing in indoor public places will still be required, and those infected will still need to isolate for seven days to prevent transmission of COVID-19. The government will decide whether to lift the mandatory wearing of masks in coming weeks.</p> <p>Poland reported almost 20,500 new infections and 360 COVID-19-related deaths Wednesday. At the peak of the most recent infection surge in mid-January, almost 60,000 new daily infections were reported in this nation of 38 million. Over 22 million people have been fully immunized with vaccines.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/23 Thailand eases entry despite omicron
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/thailand-eases-entry-requirements-omicron-threat-83059217
GIST	<p>BANGKOK -- Thailand will ease some entry requirements for foreign visitors as it balances a rising number of coronavirus cases with the need to rebuild its pandemic-damaged economy, the government announced Wednesday.</p> <p>Beginning March 1, fully vaccinated visitors must take a RT-PCR test on arrival and spend their first night at an approved hotel while awaiting the results, but will no longer need to take a second RT-PCR test and spend another night at a hotel on their fifth day, the Center for COVID-19 Situation Administration said.</p> <p>Instead, visitors arriving under the “Test & Go” program will need to take a self-administered rapid antigen test on the fifth day and report the result on a cellphone app.</p> <p>The center, headed by Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha, also reduced the minimum required health insurance coverage for COVID-19 treatment from \$50,000 to \$20,000 for each foreign entrant.</p> <p>Spokesperson Taweessin Visanuyothin said the changes took into consideration the need to boost the economy even as cases of the omicron coronavirus variant rise. Thailand relies on tourism for as much as 20% of its GDP.</p> <p>A total of 21,232 new confirmed cases and 39 deaths were announced Wednesday, although the number does not include many results found with antigen tests.</p> <p>Thailand has reported 2.77 million coronavirus cases since the pandemic started in 2020. Nearly 550,000 cases, or around 20% of the total, were reported during the first two months of this year.</p> <p>Taweessin said the death toll compared to the number of confirmed cases this year is as low as 0.19%, and that was one of the main factors behind the decision to ease entry requirements. Also, most new COVID-19 cases have been found among local residents, not foreign tourists.</p> <p>There are currently 173,605 active cases, including 882 categorized as serious, that are being treated in hospitals and field hospitals.</p> <p>In addition, there are 21,120 cases in community isolation centers and 47,373 in home isolation registered in the public health system.</p> <p>Bangkok, the hardest-hit province, will add more beds for patients with mild symptoms, Gov. Aswin Kwanmuang said.</p> <p>Unvaccinated travelers can also enter Thailand if they are quarantined in approved hotels for 10 days.</p>

	Almost 500,000 visitors entered Thailand by air from the beginning of the year through Feb. 21, Taveesin said.
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HEADLINE	02/23 Child poverty rising after tax credit expires
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/study-child-poverty-rising-tax-credit-expires-83071832
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON -- The number of children in America living in poverty jumped dramatically after just one month without the expanded child tax credit payments, according to a new study. Advocates fear the lapse in payments could unravel what they say were landmark achievements in poverty reduction.</p> <p>Columbia University's Center on Poverty and Social Policy estimates 3.7 million more children were living in poverty by January — a 41% increase from December, when families received their last check. The federal aid started last July but ended after President Joe Biden's Build Back Better bill stalled in the sharply divided Congress. Payments of up to \$300 per child were delivered directly to bank accounts on the 15th of each month, and last week marked the second missed deposit of the year.</p> <p>The Columbia study, which combines annual U.S. Census data with information from the Census Bureau's monthly Current Population Survey bulletins, found that the monthly child poverty rate increased from 12.1% in December to 17% in January. That's the highest level since December 2020, when the U.S. was grappling with high unemployment and a resurgence of COVID-19. Black and Latino children experienced the highest percentage point increases in poverty — 5.9% and 7.1% respectively.</p> <p>Megan Curran, policy director for the Center on Poverty and Social Policy, said the sudden spike shows how quickly the payments became core to household financial stability for millions of families after only six months.</p> <p>“It really had a huge impact right off the bat,” Curran said. “We saw food insecurity drop almost immediately as soon as the payments started ... all of that progress that we made could now be lost.”</p> <p>Curran said the increase in children living in poverty could also partially reflect rising prices.</p> <p>The new numbers represent a serious setback from the original goals of the child tax credit program, which ambitiously sought to cut nationwide child poverty in half. As part of Biden's \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 rescue package last year, the existing child tax credit program was massively reshaped, boosting the amount of the payments, greatly expanding the pool of eligible families and delivering the money in monthly installments designed to be incorporated into day-to-day household budgets.</p> <p>The program extended payments of \$250-per-month for children ages 6 through 17 and \$300-per-month for those under 6 to most families in the country, at an annual cost of about \$120 billion. The goal was to put discretionary cash in the hands of parents along with the freedom to spend it as they saw fit month-to-month.</p> <p>Republican lawmakers are generally unified in opposition to the expanded tax credit — describing it as excessive, inflationary and a disincentive to work. But when it was originally passed, many Democrats openly declared their intention to make the payments a permanent anchor of the American social safety net.</p> <p>The goal for the Democratic-held Congress was to keep the program running, and fight about its future months from now, armed with data and millions of anecdotes about the tax credit's benefits.</p> <p>Instead the 50-member Democratic bloc in the Senate collapsed from within, with West Virginia Sen. Joe Manchin holding out on his vote for weeks before finally refusing to endorse Biden's social spending package. Manchin cited his opposition to the child tax credit's massive price tag among his reservations with the bill.</p>

	<p>Earlier this month, Manchin called negotiations on Biden's Build Back Better bill "dead."</p> <p>Democratic New Mexico Sen. Martin Heinrich, one of the expanded child tax credit's strongest advocates, said Wednesday in a statement to The Associated Press that nearly all the children in his state benefited from the credit and that letting it expire was "a moral failure."</p> <p>An informal survey conducted of families by the nonprofit advocacy group ParentsTogether Action found a similarly immediate impact to the lapsed child tax credit payments for respondents, with roughly 1 in 5 families surveyed reporting they could no longer afford housing or enough food for their kids.</p> <p>Allison Johnson, the organization's campaign director, said the child tax credit payments were designed so parents would "not have to make these really hard choices," she said.</p> <p>The end to the deposits makes it nearly impossible for needy families, who may be struggling to pay down debt or cope with major expenses, to develop financial stability or momentum, Johnson said.</p> <p>"This lack of clarity is super difficult for people. It makes them unable to plan for things," she said.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/23 Hong Kong sticks with zero-Covid policy
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/grumbling-grows-hong-kong-sticks-covid-policy-83060316
GIST	<p>HONG KONG -- Hong Kong residents are becoming increasingly annoyed with the administration's insistence on sticking to China's "zero-COVID" strategy as the city posted another record number of cases Wednesday, bristling at ever-stricter regulations and a plan to test everyone for the virus.</p> <p>Schools have already switched to online learning and summer holidays are being moved forward so that the buildings can be used as facilities for testing, isolation and vaccination. Hong Kong says it will go ahead with the plan to test every one of its 7.5 million residents three times in March.</p> <p>Under the "zero-COVID-19" strategy, every person testing positive case must be quarantined in a hospital or other government facility for 14 days regardless of symptoms. It's in contrast with most countries, which are reducing restrictions and allowing people with mild or no symptoms to remain at home.</p> <p>"The whole world knows we have to live with the virus, only the Hong Kong government does not know," said taxi driver Chan Tai-man. "Actually it's not that they don't know, they only do what the Chinese government tells them to."</p> <p>With hospitals in Hong Kong already overwhelmed, construction crews from mainland China are being sent to build new isolation units and the city was moving to convert hotels, halls, indoor stadiums and other quarantine locations, Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam said.</p> <p>Chinese medical teams were also building mobile testing laboratories to help prepare Hong Kong for the launch of the mass testing.</p> <p>"Everybody is now predicting that we will have a pretty sizeable percentage of people infected with COVID-19 in Hong Kong, so hopefully through comprehensive universal testing we will try to identify these infected cases and put them in isolation," Lam told reporters Tuesday night.</p> <p>"To ensure the success, we need a lot more isolation facilities."</p> <p>Leung Chun-kit, a kitchen worker, said he didn't think the government was prepared for universal testing and dealing with the results.</p> <p>"I think the government should consider increasing hospital manpower and facilities to better support the health workers," he said.</p>

In his presentation of the city budget on Wednesday, Financial Secretary Paul Chan announced a series of measures to provide relief to residents and small businesses, as well as resources to fight the pandemic.

After keeping the coronavirus largely at bay with extremely strict regulations on international travel and internal restrictions, Hong Kong has seen record numbers of new cases fueled by the highly contagious omicron variant.

Last week the daily figure climbed to more than 6,000 confirmed cases for the first time, then hit more than 7,000 earlier this week. On Wednesday, Hong Kong reported 8,674 cases.

The analysis of sewage samples suggest the real number could be far greater, with experts predicting that the citywide testing could catch some 300,000 cases.

“We probably have not seen the peak of this wave, so how we are going to manage the next two to three months will be extremely essential and critical to containing, but there is no guarantee whatsoever,” Lam said.

Currently 68% of Hong Kong's population is fully vaccinated and another 10% has had one shot, according to Our World in Data.

As part of its zero-tolerance strategy, China has locked down entire cities, keeping people sequestered in their homes and providing them with food and supplies during extensive testing and contact tracing.

Hong Kong, a former British colony and semi-autonomous region of China, lacks the resources for a complete lockdown but there is growing fear among residents that it is going in that direction. Smaller lockdowns of single buildings or city blocks have raised vehement criticism.

Hong Kong operates under the “one country, two systems” principle within China, but the mainland has been exerting ever-increasing authority.

Lam insisted “there is no instruction from the Central People's Government on a lockdown” and that the current outbreak was “entirely a matter” for her administration to handle.

“Our motherland is giving us all the support that we need at this critical stage,” she said. “But at the end of the day, I am responsible under ‘one country, two systems.’”

China on Wednesday reported 90 new cases of domestic transmission, almost half in the northern Inner Mongolia region and 10 in Beijing. Shenzhen in Guangdong province, which borders Hong Kong, reported seven new cases.

Guangdong also recorded 38 imported cases, all from Hong Kong, despite strict border controls that have virtually severed travel between Hong Kong and the mainland.

Addressing the surge in Hong Kong on Monday, China's leading epidemiologist Zhong Nanshan said strict control measures were needed to prevent a higher death rate among the elderly.

Mainland China has lifted lockdowns on millions of people in cities in the north and center of the country, but continues to impose quarantines and require mass testing in districts where cases have been reported.

Practically for Lam, relaxing the zero-COVID-19 strategy would further hinder travel between the city and the mainland, where authorities require three weeks of quarantine or more. Beijing will not reopen Hong Kong's border with the mainland until the city reaches and maintains zero cases.

	<p>Hong Kong already is operating under its strictest curbs on travel, business and public activity since the pandemic began. In place since Feb. 10, they also prohibit gatherings of more than two households. Restaurants, hair salons and religious sites were ordered closed.</p> <p>Those restrictions are expected to be tightened further on Thursday, the same day the government rolls out a new app to control access to specified venues.</p> <p>The app will contain the user's vaccination records and only residents who have had at least one shot, or certain specified medical exemptions, will be allowed to enter places like restaurants, malls and supermarkets.</p> <p>"If Hong Kong still has to live the zero-COVID policy and then cannot achieve it, then Hong Kong would become an island because it basically will be cut off from the rest of the world, including China, and we already see the escalation in price of vegetables," said Francis Lun, the CEO of Geo Securities in Hong Kong.</p> <p>"In addition, the status of Hong Kong as an international financial center would suffer."</p>
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HEADLINE	02/23 Haiti police, striking workers clash; 1 killed
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/killed-wounded-police-clash-haitian-workers-83072871
GIST	<p>PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti -- Men wearing police uniforms fired into a group of people at a protest and killed a journalist Wednesday after thousands of Haitian factory workers launched a new strike to demand higher wages than those the prime minister announced earlier this week.</p> <p>Associated Press journalists observed the men fire from a car with police license plates as the day's protest appeared to be winding down. At least two journalists were seen to be wounded, and a third one identified as Maxihen Lazzare was killed.</p> <p>"What happened today is a big hit for the press," said Oméus Romane, director of Roi des Infos, a local digital media company for whom Lazzare worked. "If the constitution gives workers the right to protest, we as journalists are doing our job."</p> <p>A police spokesperson could not be reached for comment and the condition of the wounded people wasn't clear.</p> <p>Prime Minister Ariel Henry tweeted that he deplored the killing: "I also condemn the violence that has caused injuries. I offer my condolences to the family of the deceased, as well as to the other victims of these brutal acts."</p> <p>Earlier, police had fired tear gas as protesters threw rocks at them and used trucks to block a main road near the international airport in Port-au-Prince.</p> <p>It was the first day of a three-day strike organized by factory workers who also shut down an industrial park earlier this month to protest pay, which then was about 500 gourdes (\$4.80) for nine hours of work a day.</p> <p>Prime Minister Ariel Henry announced minimum wage hikes late Sunday in an attempt to quell the protests. But the increase of 185 gourdes (\$1.80) a day for factory workers only served to enrage them.</p> <p>"Can you imagine? I have two kids, and I have to pay a home," said 38-year-old André Saintil. "The government is keeping us in misery."</p> <p>"People can't do anything with this miserable salary," said Jean Wilkens Pierre.</p>

	<p>The 39-year-old factory worker said the salary barely covers food and transportation costs at a time when Haiti is seeing double-digit inflation. He said he'd accept nothing less than a minimum daily wage of 1,500 gourdes (\$14).</p> <p>He was part of a crowd that carried tree branches and chanted, "You raised the gas, but didn't raise our salaries," referring to the prime minister's recent announcement that the government could no longer afford to keep fuel subsidies in place.</p> <p>"They probably think we can't resist, that we'll get tired of protesting, but this is going to be an ongoing fight...for them to understand we are human beings," Saintil said.</p> <p>Hours after the protest, Haiti's Association of Industries issued a statement condemning what it called violent acts against factories located in the industrial park and elsewhere, and said it would close them on Thursday to protect workers and equipment.</p> <p>The prime minister announced other salary increases including a new daily wage of 540 gourdes (\$5) for those working in restaurants and agriculture and 770 gourdes (more than \$7) for those employed in places including supermarkets, car dealerships and undertakers.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/23 Nicaragua jails 7 opposition leaders
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/nicaragua-convicts-opposition-leaders-conspiracy-83074862
GIST	<p>MEXICO CITY -- Nicaraguan judges on Wednesday convicted seven opposition leaders, including former high-level Sandinistas and three former presidential contenders, of "conspiracy to undermine national integrity."</p> <p>A spokesperson for the Civic Alliance opposition coalition said the seven included Félix Maradiaga, Juan Sebastián Chamorro and the Central American country's former ambassador to the United States, Arturo Cruz Sequeira.</p> <p>All three had been planning to run in the Nov. 7 presidential elections before the government of President Daniel Ortega arrested them and around 40 other opponents.</p> <p>With all of them in custody, Ortega cruised to winning a fourth consecutive presidential term in November elections widely criticized by the international community.</p> <p>The string of recent trials of opposition figures has been carried out in the infamous Chipote prison. The defendants have only been permitted to have their lawyers present.</p> <p>The trials "have been full of violations of the law and violations of rights and due process, and therefore they are null and void trials, that have issued null sentences," the Civic Alliance said in a statement.</p> <p>Cruz Sequeira, 68, was one of three opposition figures suffering from health problems who were ordered to home confinement last week, after another imprisoned opponent died following months of incarceration.</p> <p>Former Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister José Pallais, 68, was convicted Wednesday. He has also been granted house arrest. Also convicted were business leader José Adán Aguerrí, Violeta Granera and opposition leader Tamara Dávila.</p> <p>Prosecutors claimed the seven had attempted to "conspire" against Ortega's government by participating in a WhatsApp chat with a U.S.-based political analyst, Manuel Orozco.</p> <p>Most of those convicted so far by Nicaraguan judges have later been sentenced to 13 years in prison.</p>

	<p>Those already sentenced include Victor Hugo Tinoco, who was deputy foreign affairs minister during the first Sandinista government in 1979 but later split with Ortega. Tinoco also served as Nicaragua's ambassador to the United Nations and was the lead negotiator in peace talks with the U.S.-backed Contras.</p> <p>Hugo Torres, a former Sandinista guerrilla leader who once led a raid that helped free then rebel Ortega from prison, died while awaiting trial. He was 73.</p> <p>Thousands have fled into exile since Nicaraguan security forces violently put down antigovernment protests in 2018. Ortega says the protests were actually an attempted coup with foreign backing, and many of those on trial have been accused of working with foreign powers for his overthrow or encouraging foreign nations to apply sanctions on members of his family and government.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/23 Japan, China spar over diplomat detention
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/japan-china-spar-japan-diplomats-detention-beijing-83058794
GIST	<p>TOKYO -- Japan's Foreign Ministry said Wednesday it has lodged a strong protest and demanded an apology after its diplomat was detained and questioned by authorities in Beijing.</p> <p>The diplomat from the Japanese Embassy was seized while on duty and held for several hours on Monday, the Foreign Ministry said.</p> <p>The diplomat was carrying out his legitimate work and the detention violated the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, which stipulates the immunity of diplomats from civil and criminal jurisdiction of the host nation, the ministry said.</p> <p>The diplomat, whose name and other details were not disclosed, was released later Monday, a ministry official said on condition of anonymity, citing protocol. There was no sign the diplomat was physically abused while he was being interrogated, the official said.</p> <p>Vice Foreign Minister Takeo Mori on Tuesday summoned Yang Yu, charge d'affaires and China's interim ambassador in Tokyo, demanding China offer an apology and avoid such situations in the future.</p> <p>In Beijing on Wednesday, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying told reporters that "China has made a stern complaint with Japan, urging it to respect China's law, strictly restrain its consular staff in China and prevent such incidents from happening again."</p> <p>She said the Japanese diplomat had engaged in activities "inconsistent with their capacity in China" and that the relevant Chinese departments conducted investigations and questioning "in accordance with the law and regulation." No other details were provided.</p> <p>Last week, Japan's government said its national in his 50s had been detained in Shanghai since December over unspecified law violations, but gave no further details.</p> <p>There have been several other cases of arrests in the past involving Japanese citizens who had businesses or connections with China over allegations including spying, but cases against diplomats or government officials are extremely rare.</p> <p>In 2002, a Japanese defense attache was held by Chinese authorities for several hours.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/23 Canada PM revokes emergency powers act
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/canada-official-emergency-powers-removed-blockade-end-83069830

GIST

TORONTO -- Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced Wednesday he is removing emergency powers police can use after authorities ended the blockades at the borders and the occupation in Ottawa by truckers and others opposed to COVID-19 restrictions.

Trudeau said the “threat continues” but the acute emergency that included entrenched occupations has ended. His government invoked the powers last week and lawmakers affirmed the powers late Monday.

“The situation is no longer an emergency, therefore the federal government will be ending the use of the emergencies act,” Trudeau said. “We are confident that existing laws and bylaws are sufficient.”

The emergencies act allows authorities to declare certain areas as no-go zones. It also allows police to freeze truckers’ personal and corporate bank accounts and compel tow truck companies to haul away vehicles.

The trucker protest grew until it closed a handful of Canada-U.S. border posts and shut down key parts of the capital for more than three weeks. But all border blockades have now ended and the streets around the Canadian Parliament are quiet.

“We were very clear that the use of the emergencies act would be limited in time,” Trudeau said.

Trudeau had warned earlier this week there were some truckers just outside Ottawa who might be planning further blockades or occupations. His public safety minister also said there was an attempt to block a border crossing in British Columbia over the weekend.

The protests, which were first aimed at a COVID-19 vaccine mandate for cross-border truckers but also encompassed fury over the range of COVID-19 restrictions and hatred of Trudeau, reflected the spread of disinformation in Canada and simmering populist and right-wing anger.

The self-styled Freedom Convoy shook Canada’s reputation for civility, inspired convoys in France, New Zealand and the Netherlands and interrupted trade, causing economic damage on both sides of the border. Hundreds of trucks eventually occupied the streets around Parliament, a display that was part protest and part carnival.

For almost a week the busiest U.S.-Canada border crossing, the Ambassador Bridge between Windsor, Ontario and Detroit, was blocked. The crossing sees more than 25% of the trade between the two countries.

Authorities moved to reopen the border posts, but police in Ottawa did little but issue warnings until Friday, even as hundreds and sometimes thousands of protesters clogged the streets of the city and besieged Parliament Hill.

On Friday, authorities launched the largest police operation in Canadian history, arresting a string of Ottawa protesters and increasing that pressure on Saturday until the streets in front of Parliament were clear. Eventually, police arrested at least 191 people and towed away 79 vehicles. Many protesters retreated as the pressure increased.

The Royal Canadian Mounted Police said those who had their bank accounts frozen were “influencers in the illegal protest in Ottawa, and owners and/or drivers of vehicles who did not want to leave the area.”

The province of Ontario also announced it is ending its state of emergency but said the “emergency tools provided to law enforcement will be maintained at this time as police continue to address ongoing activity on the ground.”

Those who block critical infrastructure face up to a year in prison and a maximum fine of \$100,000.

	<p>A small convoy of truckers demanding an end to coronavirus mandates began a cross-country drive from California to the Washington, D.C., area on Wednesday.</p> <p>Several hundred people rallied in a parking lot in the cold, windswept Mojave Desert town of Adelanto before about two dozen trucks and a number of other vehicles hit the road. It wasn't clear how many intended to go all the way.</p> <p>The Pentagon has approved the deployment of 700 unarmed National Guard troops to the nation's capital as it prepares for multiple trucker convoys. The troops would be used to assist with traffic control during demonstrations expected in the city in the coming days, the Pentagon said.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/23 Storm to pummel Northeast: ice, snow
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/storm-wreaks-havoc-midwest-roads-2nd-storm-set/story?id=83060831
GIST	<p>One winter storm has wreaked havoc on Midwest roadways, and another is gearing up to bring a dangerous wave of ice and snow to the Northeast.</p> <p>The first storm slammed the Midwest Tuesday, dropping 10 to 30 inches of snow in some areas.</p> <p>The Minnesota State Patrol reported 373 crashes in the last 24 hours, injuring 34 people.</p> <p>The second storm is forecast to bring major ice accumulation this week from Texas to New York state.</p> <p>On Wednesday the storm will create horrendous conditions on roads in Texas, Oklahoma and Arkansas.</p> <p>A winter storm warning has been issued for Dallas where ice will be the biggest threat. Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport is experiencing the most flight cancellations for any airport on Wednesday, with more than 1,000 canceled flights.</p> <p>The storm then moves north, bringing rain, freezing rain, sleet and snow to the mid-Atlantic and Northeast.</p> <p>On Thursday morning an icy mix will bring sleet, snow and freezing rain to the Mid-Atlantic and Washington, D.C., area.</p> <p>Thursday night, a more significant wave of ice and snow will arrive to the Interstate 95 corridor from D.C. to Philadelphia and into northern New Jersey.</p> <p>Freezing rain and sleet will fall Thursday night into Friday morning from Philadelphia to New York City to New York's Hudson Valley.</p> <p>Friday morning's rush hour may be very dangerous in New Jersey, New York City and up to Boston.</p> <p>The storm will start to move out Friday afternoon with lingering snow most of the afternoon in New England.</p> <p>Heavy snow is expected from central New York into Connecticut, Rhode Island and Massachusetts. Some areas could see up to 1 foot of snow, especially from Albany, New York, to Boston.</p> <p>Northern Pennsylvania, the lower Hudson Valley, Connecticut and northern New Jersey could get 4 to 8 inches of snow.</p> <p>Ice, sleet and freezing rain will be the biggest threat for Pennsylvania, northern New Jersey and New York City.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/24 US braces for Russian cyberattacks
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2022/02/24/tech/russia-ukraine-us-sanctions-cyberattacks/index.html
GIST	<p>(CNN Business)The standoff between the United States and Russia over the conflict in Ukraine has so far mainly played out on diplomatic and economic fronts.</p> <p>But now, as Russia invades Ukraine and the United States imposes new sanctions on Russia, there are concerns that may change. The US government is on high alert for the possibility of the conflict spilling over into cyberspace, where Russia has shown an ability to cause significant disruption and damage in the past.</p> <p>On Tuesday, a senior FBI cyber official warned US businesses and local governments that they should be vigilant against potential ransomware attacks, just days after multiple US agencies issued a similar warning to executives at major US banks, according to people with knowledge of both meetings.</p> <p>If the recent past is any indication, there are a number of ways Russian hackers could disrupt US businesses and the general public.</p> <p>Precedent for Russian cyberattacks</p> <p>Some of the biggest cyberattacks against US infrastructure in the past two years have been linked to suspected Russian hackers. The list includes the SolarWinds hack that infiltrated several government agencies in 2020, the ransomware attack that forced a shutdown of one of America's largest fuel pipelines for several days last year and another attack on one of the world's largest meat producers, JBS.</p> <p>Russia has also been repeatedly accused of perpetrating online disinformation campaigns targeting the United States, including, most notably, efforts to interfere with US elections and sow discord. US officials this week also accused Russian intelligence of spreading disinformation about Ukraine.</p> <p>While many online attacks can't directly be linked to the Russian state, there's a widespread belief that hackers operate with Russia's blessing, according to Herb Lin, a senior research scholar for cyber policy and security at Stanford University's Center for International Security and Cooperation.</p> <p>"They don't operate directly for the Russian government, but they operate under a set of rules that says: 'you guys do what you want... don't target Russian stuff and we won't bother you,'" Lin told CNN Business.</p> <p>Spillover from Ukraine</p> <p>Ukraine has already faced multiple cyberattacks since the conflict with Russia started, including one on Wednesday that targeted the website of the country's parliament as well as several banks and government agencies.</p> <p>Analysts say even targeted cyberattacks against Ukraine could potentially have implications beyond the country's borders (both physical and virtual). In a report Tuesday, analysts at S&P Global Ratings flagged "a heightened risk of cyberattacks on Ukraine... which could create knock-on effects for corporations, governments, and other parties in the region and beyond."</p> <p>Companies worldwide that work with organizations in Ukraine need to be particularly careful, the analysts added, "since connections to Ukrainian systems might be used as a pivot point to other targets."</p> <p>Military targets</p> <p>Even if Russian hackers don't directly set their sights on US entities, Ukraine's dependence on foreign technology can pose big problems for the United States, according to Lin.</p>

"For example, Ukraine doesn't have its own spy satellites, so where does it get its spy imagery? It gets it from commercial satellites," Lin said, with some of the companies behind those commercial satellites potentially located in the United States. "That's an obvious place you would expect Russian cyberattacks to be targeted. And that's just one example of what could be possible."

Should the conflict in Ukraine escalate further, Lin added, "all the stuff in the United States that directly helps the Ukrainian military machine... becomes fair game for the Russians to target."

Domestic targets

As past precedent has shown, Russian cyberattackers increasingly seem to target large-scale US infrastructure — and there's only so much consumers can do about it despite the resulting disruption to their own lives.

For individuals, the most important defense is to ensure [any potential vulnerabilities in your devices are patched](#), whether that's through software updates or additional security measures such as two-factor authentication, where a code from an external device or app is used in addition to your password.

The burden is arguably on the public and private sector to prepare. Lin notes that the US banking system may be particularly vulnerable to attacks, with Biden's sanctions aimed at crippling the Russian financial system making American banks a ripe target for retaliation — particularly if the US moves to further cut off Russia from global financial networks.

The Biden administration has focused on shoring up US cyber defenses in recent months to protect against overseas attacks, including government entities and major businesses. But vulnerabilities always exist, and all it takes is one breach.

"Will they [cyberattackers] have more difficulty being successful? Yes, but the problem is that we don't see those," Lin said. "Let's say they're successful one in ten times instead of one in five times. It's still one in ten, nobody notices the others that have failed."

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HEADLINE	02/24 Asia most targeted region in 2021
SOURCE	https://www.zdnet.com/article/asia-most-targeted-region-in-2021-taking-on-one-in-four-cybersecurity-attacks/
GIST	<p>Asia was the most targeted region last year, accounting for one in four cybersecurity attacks launched worldwide. Japan, Australia, and India experienced the most incidents in the region, where server access and ransomware were amongst the most popular forms of attacks.</p> <p>Financial services and manufacturing organisations also bore the brunt of attacks in Asia, taking on almost 60% of such incidents, according to IBM's annual X-Force Threat Intelligence Index. IBM Security monitors 150 billion security events daily across more than 130 countries, pulling from data sources such as network and endpoint detection devices, incident response engagements, and phishing kit tracking.</p> <p>Finance and insurance companies, in particular, took on 30% of attacks IBM was able to remediate. Manufacturing organisations bore 29% of attacks in the region, followed by professional and business services at 13% and the transport sector at 10%.</p> <p>Asia took on 26% of cybersecurity attacks IBM observed globally. Japan, in particular, saw significant activities that the tech vendor attributed to the Summer Olympic Games, which were held in Tokyo last July.</p> <p>Europe and North America received 24% and 23%, respectively, of attacks launched last year, while the Middle East and Africa took on 14% and Latin America received 13%.</p>

In Asia, server access attacks and [ransomware](#) were the top two forms of attacks last year, accounting for 20% and 11%, respectively, of all incidents. Data theft came in third at 10%, while remote access trojans and adware each accounted for 9% of attacks.

The high portion of server access attacks might point to Asian organisations' ability to identify such attacks quickly before they escalated to more critical forms of attacks, IBM noted.

It added that REvil accounted for 33% of ransomware attacks in Asia, with others such as Bitlocker, Nefilim, MedusaLocker, and Ragnar Locker also surfacing last year.

Hackers also looked to exploit vulnerabilities and tapped phishing as a way to breach businesses in Asia, with both tied as the top infection vectors contributing to 43% of attacks. Brute force was used in 7% of attacks while another 7% of hackers used stolen credentials to gain initial access to networks.

Worldwide, IBM said there was a 33% climb in attacks brought about by vulnerability exploitation of unpatched software. This led to 44% of ransomware attacks carried out last year.

Unpatched vulnerabilities in manufacturing companies, specifically, resulted in 47% of attacks. This vertical experienced the most attacks last year, taking on 23% of the overall global count. Financial services and insurance previously had been the most targeted industry, according to IBM.

"Experiencing more ransomware attacks than any other industry, attackers wagered on the ripple effect that disruption on manufacturing organisations would cause their downstream [supply chains](#) to pressure them into [paying the ransom](#)," the report noted. It stressed the need for enterprises to prioritise vulnerability management to mitigate security risks.

Unpatched vulnerabilities led to half of attacks in Asia, Europe, and MEA last year.

According to IBM, ransomware remained the top attack method in 2021. In addition, the average lifespan of a ransomware group before it shuttered or rebranded was estimated to be 17 months. The report pointed to REvil, which was responsible for 37% of all ransomware attacks in 2021 and had operated for four years through various rebrands. This suggested the likelihood it had [resurfaced](#) despite its [takedown in an operation](#) involving [multiple governments](#) in mid-2021.

Hackers also had their eyes on cloud environments. The number of new Linux ransomware code climbed 146% last year alongside a shift in target focus towards Docker containers. These activities could make it easier for more threat actors to tap cloud platforms for malicious purposes, IBM warned.

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HEADLINE	02/23 Crooks seek profit Russia-Ukraine conflict
SOURCE	https://www.securityweek.com/cybercriminals-seek-profit-russia-ukraine-conflict
GIST	<p>Dark web threat actors are looking to take advantage of the tensions between Russia and Ukraine, offering network access and databases that could be relevant to those involved in the conflict, according to a new report from Accenture.</p> <p>Since mid-January, cybercriminals have started to advertise compromised assets relevant to the Russia-Ukraine conflict, and they are expected to increase their offering of databases and network access, with potentially crippling effects for the targeted organizations.</p> <p>Just over a month ago, soon after the destructive WhisperGate attacks on multiple government, IT, and non-profit organizations in Ukraine, threat actors started to advertise on the dark web access to both breached networks and databases that allegedly contained personally identifiable information (PII).</p>

On February 2, an underground forum user was asking \$160 for access to a subdomain of a Ukrainian agricultural exchange. The threat actor claimed to have shell and database access to the subdomain, as well as access to payment information and contracts.

That level of access, Accenture notes, allows an attacker to “obtain PII and payment card data, resell exfiltrated data, deploy malicious software such as ransomware, deface websites on the affected subdomain, or possibly even disrupt active exchanges and trades.”

Starting late January 2022, threat actors have been offering on a Tor website five databases named “gov.ua,” allegedly containing the personal information of Ukrainian citizens that was allegedly harvested from Ukrainian government sites. As of February 10, two of the databases appear to have been sold.

Also in late January, an underground forum user shared a SQL database supposedly stolen from a Ukrainian federal agency, which allegedly contains detailed information on wanted criminals. According to another user, however, the data is publicly available on a Ukrainian government website.

On January 23, another forum user started offering for sale over 70 administrator accounts at a Ukrainian bank and advertised 220 email addresses along with alleged vulnerabilities in the systems of a Ukrainian energy sector investor. In other posts, the same user claimed to have discovered vulnerabilities at biotechnology companies, US banks, and UK telecommunications organizations.

On January 22, an underground forum user started advertising personal information of Ukrainian citizens and also provided a link for interested buyers to download a sample of the data, as proof of legitimacy.

Some of these threat actors appear to have high credibility, being endorsed by other users on the same underground forums, which suggests that some of these claims might be legitimate. Others, however, do not have the same level of feedback, making it difficult for security researchers to assess the credibility of their claims.

“Nation-state actors could purchase and leverage network access to critical infrastructure organizations, such as telecommunications or energy organizations, as well as banks. They could use the accesses with asymmetrical tactics to cause disruptions, including depriving users of interconnectivity, energy, or financial transactions, if timed correctly,” Accenture notes in its [report](#).

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HEADLINE	02/24 Vishing makes phishing more successful
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/vishing-phishing-three-times/
GIST	<p>Phishing emerged as the number one threat vector in 2021, but cases of vulnerability exploitation surged 33% year-on-year thanks to the impact of Log4Shell, according to IBM.</p> <p>The X-Force Threat Intelligence Index 2022 was compiled from billions of datapoints, including network and endpoint detection devices, incident response engagements and domain name tracking.</p> <p>It revealed that phishing overtook vulnerability exploitation as the top pathway for compromise globally last year, accounting for 41% of initial access attempts, up from 33% in 2020.</p> <p>Interestingly, click rates for the average targeted phishing campaign increased around three-fold, from 18% to 53%, when phone phishing (vishing) was also used by threat actors.</p> <p>In the UK, an estimated 80% of consumers received a scam call or text over the summer of 2021. Regulator Ofcom this week announced new measures which will demand more proactive work from operators to root out the use of spoofed numbers.</p> <p>IBM highlighted business email compromise (BEC) and ransomware actors as particularly prolific users of phishing during 2021.</p>

	<p>Despite dropping into second place, vulnerability exploitation remains a major threat to organizations. The number of incidents using this as an infection vector surged by a third year-on-year in 2021.</p> <p>“X-Force observed actors leveraging multiple known vulnerabilities, such as CVE-2021-35464 (a Java deserialization vulnerability) and CVE-2019-19781 (a Citrix path traversal flaw), to gain initial access to networks of interest,” the report noted.</p> <p>“In addition, we observed threat actors leverage zero-day vulnerabilities in major attacks like the Kaseya ransomware attack and Microsoft Exchange Server incidents to access victim networks and devices.”</p> <p>However, it was Log4j vulnerability CVE-2021-44228 (aka Log4Shell) which appears to have driven the vector’s rise in popularity in 2021. Despite only being disclosed in December, it was the second-most exploited bug over the whole year, the report claimed.</p> <p>This echoes findings from Fortinet, which revealed this week that Log4Shell was its most prevalent detection of the entire second half of 2021.</p> <p>“In less than a month, the Log4j RCE managed nearly 50 times the activity of 2021’s other darling, ProxyLogon, measured by peak 10-day average volume,” it said.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/23 Network hackers eye US high-value targets
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/network-hackers-focus-on-selling-high-value-targets-in-the-us/
GIST	<p>A CrowdStrike report looking into access brokers' advertisements since 2019 has identified a preference in academic, government, and technology entities based in the United States.</p> <p>Initial access brokers are a vital link in the cybercrime chain, as these threat actors are devoted to breaching corporate networks for future attacks.</p> <p>These brokers then sell access to these networks to other cybercriminals who will do the "dirty" and more risky work of deploying malware, ransomware, move laterally, conduct espionage, etc.</p> <p>Previously, we have seen threat actors selling access to networks for as little as \$1,500, but as analyzed in the CrowdStrike report, the price depends on the compromised organization's location, size, and type.</p> <p>Countries targeted</p> <p>The most lucrative targets in terms of how much they can yield in dark web listings are the U.S. and the U.K. Listings from these two countries are selling for an average price of just below \$4,000.</p> <p>This is why the United States takes the lion's share of the target focus, accounting for over half (55%) of all initial access offerings on dark web forums and markets.</p> <p>The U.K. is far behind with only 7%, while Brazil, Canada, and France have a significant share of the targeted pie (between 6% and 8%).</p> <p>Another highly sought-after listing is access in Canadian organizations, which sells at an average of \$3,119, while Italy is also fairing well with \$2,900.</p> <p>Sectors targeted</p> <p>The sectors targeted by initial access brokers are also determining factors. Depending on the entity, threat actors may use the access for financial extortion, data exfiltration, cyber-espionage, BEC acts, etc. According to CrowdStrike, the academic, government, and technology sectors are targeted the most, followed by financial, healthcare, and energy services.</p>

Considering that the dataset began in 2019, the outbreak of COVID-19, which led to a global research effort for the development of a vaccine, must have played a crucial role in the ranking of academic at the top.

When looking at the average asking price for each sector, government listings are the most valuable at \$6,151, followed by financial service providers at \$5,855.

Outlook

The access broker economy is shifting, like all sectors of cybercrime, and while these threat actors employ all tricks in the book to keep the supply alive, easy and widely exploitable flaws [like Log4Shell](#) have pushed them aside.

Also, ransomware groups now use exclusive initial access contractors directed to attack specific targets rather than buying random firm access that may also be doubtful.

CrowdStrike has identified a short-lived fallout between Q4 2021 and Q1 2022 but now reports a resurgence in network access advertisements.

The demand is expected to remain high in 2022, but it'll all depend on the vulnerability landscape and the trends that underpin the operation of hands-on hackers like RaaS operators.

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HEADLINE	02/23 Ukraine enterprises hit; new wiper malware
SOURCE	https://www.scmagazine.com/analysis/apt/ukraine-organizations-hit-by-new-wiper-malware?web_view=true
GIST	<p>After Russia announced it would send troops into Ukraine under the guise of a peacekeeping mission, new wiper malware has started targeting Ukrainian enterprises Wednesday. The wiper malware follows DDoS and SMS spam attacks on Ukraine earlier in the day. Sample has also been seen in Lithuania and Latvia.</p> <p>"These were large organizations that have been affected," said Jean-Ian Boutin, head of ESET Threat Research, via email. "We cannot give attribution based on information that is available to us, but the attack appears to be related to the ongoing crisis in Ukraine."</p> <p>ESET first noted the attack on Twitter Wednesday, with Broadcom Software's Symantec division confirming on the platform soon after.</p> <p>"We know of at least two organizations who have been targeted," Vikram Thakur, technical director of Symantec Threat Intelligence told reporters in a statement.</p> <p>Symantec has seen the wiper in Ukraine, Lithuania and Latvia, with targets of financial institutions and government contractors.</p> <p>According to ESET's telemetry, the victim pool in Ukraine numbers at least in the hundreds.</p> <p>Earlier this year, other wiper malware known as WhisperGate also targeted Ukraine, which the Ukrainian government attributed to Russia.</p> <p>The new wiper was first seen by ESET at roughly 5 p.m. local time. ESET believes it was first deployed today.</p> <p>"The wiper abuses legitimate drivers from the EaseUS Partition Master software in order to corrupt data," tweeted ESET.</p> <p>Other findings from ESET include the binaries being compiled during the last days of last year, meaning that the mechanism of attack was assembled built at least six weeks ago, well before this week's</p>

	<p>announcement of peacekeeping forces. Attackers appear to have taken control of Active Directory to drop the wiper. ESET is calling the malware "HermeticWiper," which appears to be a reference to the certificate used to sign the wiper, issued to "Hermetica Digital Ltd."</p> <p>If the attack is indeed Russian, to whom neither vendor has made an attribution, the malware being seen nations outside of Ukraine could raise concerns of spillover. In 2017, a Russian wiper attack on Ukraine known as NotPetya caused billions of dollars in global damage when it exceeded its initial targeting.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/23 FTC: \$5.8B lost to fraud in 2020
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/ftc-americans-report-losing-over-58-billion-to-fraud-in-2021/?&web_view=true
GIST	<p>The US Federal Trade Commission (FTC) said today that Americans reported losses of more than \$5.8 billion to fraud during last year, a massive total increase of over 70% compared to the losses reported in 2020.</p> <p>The FTC added a total of roughly 5.7 million consumer reports to its Consumer Sentinel Network (Sentinel) secure online database in 2021.</p> <p>Out of these, US consumers filed 2,789,161 fraud reports during 2021, 25% of them indicating a monetary loss and informing the consumer protection agency that they lost a total of \$5,893,260,382 to fraud schemes.</p> <p>"Of the losses reported by consumers, more than \$2.3 billion of losses reported last year were due to imposter scams—up from \$1.2 billion in 2020, while online shopping accounted for about \$392 million in reported losses from consumers—up from \$246 million in 2020," the FTC said.</p> <p>The FTC also received nearly 1.4 million reports of identity theft in 2021, representing a quarter of all reports filed last year.</p> <p>The FTC said that young consumers (aged 20 to 29) have reported losing money to fraud a lot more often than older people (ages 80 and over).</p> <p>However, "while younger people lost money 41 percent of the time they experienced fraud, older adults lost money only 17 percent of the time," according to FTC's data.</p> <p>"But when older people did lose money, they lost a median amount of \$1,500, or three times the median amount younger people lost."</p> <p>You can report fraud attempts at ReportFraud.ftc.gov and file an identity theft report at IdentityTheft.gov.</p> <p>Once included in the Consumer Sentinel Network network, your report will be available to more than 3,000 federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies across the US.</p> <p>Filed reports are helpful when investigating fraud, scams, and bad business practices, as well as for discovering trends and educating the public.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/23 Russia hackers build botnet of firewalls
SOURCE	https://www.wired.com/story/sandworm-cyclops-blink-hacking-tool/
GIST	<p>ANY APPEARANCE OF a new tool used by Russia's notorious, disruptive Sandworm hackers will raise the eyebrows of cybersecurity professionals braced for high-impact cyberattacks. When US and UK agencies warn of one such tool spotted in the wild just as Russia prepares a potential mass-scale invasion of Ukraine, it's enough to raise alarms.</p>

On Wednesday, both the UK National Cybersecurity Center and the US's Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency [released advisories](#) warning that they—along with the FBI and NSA—have detected a new form of network device malware being used by Sandworm, a group tied to some of the [most destructive cyberattacks in history](#) and [believed to be a part of Russia's GRU military intelligence agency](#).

The new malware, which the agencies call Cyclops Blink, has been found in firewall devices sold by networking hardware company Watchguard since at least June 2019. But the NCSC warns that “it is likely that Sandworm would be capable of compiling the malware for other architectures and firmware,” that it may have already infected other common network routers used in homes and businesses, and that the malware's “deployment also appears indiscriminate and widespread.”

It remains unclear whether Sandworm has been hacking network devices for purposes of espionage, building out its network of hacked machines to use as communications infrastructure for future operations, or targeting networks for disruptive cyberattacks, says Joe Slowik, a security researcher for Gigamon and a longtime tracker of the Sandworm group. But given that Sandworm's past history of [inflicting digital chaos](#) includes destroying entire networks inside Ukrainian companies and government agencies, [triggering blackouts by targeting electrical utilities in Ukraine](#), and [releasing the NotPetya malware](#) there that spread globally and cost \$10 billion in damage, Slowik says even an ambiguous move by the hackers merits caution—particularly as another Russian invasion of Ukraine looms.

“It definitely seems like Sandworm has continued the path of compromising relatively large networks of these devices for purposes unknown,” Slowik says. “There are a number of options available to them, and given that it's Sandworm, some of those options could be concerning, and bleed into deny, degrade, disrupt, and potentially destroy, though there's no evidence of that yet.”

CISA and the NCSC both describe the Cyclops Blink malware as a successor to an [earlier Sandworm tool known as VPNFilter](#), which infected half a million routers to form a global botnet before it was identified by Cisco and the FBI in 2018 and largely dismantled. There's no sign that Sandworm has taken control of nearly that many devices with Cyclops Blink. But like VPNFilter, the new malware serves as a foothold on network devices and would allow the hackers to download new functionality to infected machines, whether to enlist them as proxies for relaying command-and-control communications or targeting the networks where the devices are installed.

In its own analysis of the malware, [Watchguard writes](#) that the hackers were able to infect its devices via a vulnerability it patched in a May 2021 update, which even before then would have only offered an opening when a control interface for the devices was exposed to the internet. The hackers also appear to have used a vulnerability in how Watchguard devices verify the legitimacy of firmware updates, downloading their own firmware to the firewall devices and installing it so that their malware can survive reboots.

Watchguard estimates that about 1 percent of its total number of installed firewalls were infected, though it didn't give a total number for how many devices that represented. Watchguard also [released tools to detect infections](#) on its firewalls and, if necessary, wipe and reinstall their software.

The NCSC notes on its website that its advisory about Cyclops Blink is “not directly linked to the situation in Ukraine.” But even without an immediate link to the unfolding conflict in the region, signs that Russia's hyper-aggressive GRU hackers have built a new botnet of network devices serve as a timely wake-up call.

Last week, White House officials warned that a series of distributed denial of service attacks that hit Ukrainian government, military, and corporate networks [were the work of the GRU](#). A new round of those DDoS attacks on Ukrainian targets started again on Wednesday, along with data wiper malware that security firm ESET [says](#) was installed in “hundreds of machines” in the country. And last month a fake ransomware campaign struck Ukrainian networks, with troubling similarities to Sandworm's [NotPetya cyberattack in 2017](#), which posed as ransomware as it shut down hundreds of networks in Ukraine and around the world. As Russia has surrounded Ukraine's borders with troops and declared the independence of two separatist groups within Ukrainian territory, [fears have mounted that new, mass-scale cyberattacks will accompany any physical invasion](#).

That means network administrators—and even home users of Watchguard devices—should look for signs of Cyclops Blink on their devices and deal with any infections immediately, even if it means yanking them off the network, argues Craig Williams, a former Cisco security researcher who worked on the VPNFilter investigation. “Identify compromised devices and unplug them,” he [wrote](#) on Twitter Wednesday. “Help stop Russian cyber weapons.”

Even if that infected box in your server closet isn't targeting your network, in other words, it might be enabling digital mayhem targeting someone else's, halfway around the world.

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HEADLINE	02/23 Russia cyberwar snarl global supply chain?
SOURCE	https://finance.yahoo.com/news/russian-cyberwar-ukraine-could-snarl-122154423.html
GIST	<p>Collateral damage from a wave of cyberattacks targeting Ukrainian government websites may disrupt shipping lines and logistics firms, perhaps reigniting the worst of last year's supply chain chaos.</p> <p>The US Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) is warning American businesses to brace for the collateral effects of another round of cyberattacks as Russia ramps up hostilities against Ukraine. History suggests Russian hacks will not stay within the borders of the former Soviet republic.</p> <p>After Russia annexed the Crimean peninsula in 2014, Russian hackers used malware to create power blackouts across Ukraine in the dead of winter in 2015 and 2016. Then Kremlin-backed hackers launched the NotPetya attack in 2017 sweeping up thousands of unrelated companies around the world and inflicting \$10 billion worth of indiscriminate economic damage, mostly outside Ukraine. Among the victims were Maersk, the world's largest shipping line, and FedEx's European subsidiary TNT Express.</p> <p>US and European officials are once again blaming Russia for renewed cyberattacks in Ukraine, a key part of Russia's efforts to destabilize the former Soviet republic, but this time there is little slack in the world's supply chains to absorb disruptions. Unlike 2017, freight and logistical operations are near capacity.</p> <p>Shipping lines are still not running smoothly. “A similar cyber-attack [to the 2017 NotPetya attack] could have a devastating effect on global supply chains,” said Lars Jensen, CEO of the shipping consultancy Vespucci Maritime, at a Feb. 14 supply chain conference hosted by Freightwaves.</p> <p>A major disruption to shipping lines, trucking fleets, and last-mile delivery companies today would have far greater consequences, putting the world on track to relive some of the worst supply chain disruptions of 2021. In a worst-case scenario, current backlogs at ports could continue unabated until the end of the year, growing more acute as the holiday shopping season once again strains supply chains, leading to high freight costs that exacerbate inflation.</p> <p>How an attack on Ukraine could snarl global supply chains</p> <p>Five years ago, Russian hackers accidentally created one of the largest and most damaging cyberattacks of all time when it launched the NotPetya attack to disrupt Ukrainian infrastructure. The malware quickly leaped from a popular Ukrainian tax filing software to computers across the country and eventually businesses outside of Ukraine, inadvertently paralyzing US and European supply chains.</p> <p>Maersk was among the hardest hit. The attack completely shut down Maersk's computer networks for two weeks, leaving the world's largest fleet of container ships unable to accept new bookings and bringing activity at 17 Maersk-controlled ports to a standstill. Maersk estimates the paralysis created \$300 million in economic damage. FedEx lost \$400 million when the virus infected TNT Express's computers and its European shipments were paralyzed.</p> <p>But security officials now also worry about Russian hackers directly targeting key US and European companies in retaliation for economic sanctions. Such an attack could cripple global supply chains still recovering from the chaos of 2021. Ports and warehouses need months to clear out massive backlogs</p>

	before shipping demand picks up again in September before the 2022 holiday season. Any disruption now might stall those efforts, leaving the world facing the same high prices and shipping delays again.
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HEADLINE	02/23 Russia-backed group behind new malware
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/23/russia-hacking-malware-cyberattack-virus-ukraine
GIST	<p>A cyber report published by intelligence agencies in the UK and US on Wednesday has attributed insidious new malware to a notorious Russia-backed hacking group.</p> <p>The findings come amid concerns of potential Russian cyber-attacks against Ukraine as the threat of war in the region grows.</p> <p>The joint research was published by the National Cyber Security Centre in the UK and US agencies including the National Security Agency. It warned that a Russian state-backed hacker group known as Sandworm had developed a new type of malware called Cyclops Blink, which targets firewall devices made by the manufacturer Watchguard to protect computers against hacks.</p> <p>The sophisticated virus can withstand typical remedies including reboots, the report said. The findings come as the UK and US, allies to Ukraine, are on high alert for Russian state-sponsored hacks. The agencies added that their statement was a “routine advisory” not directly linked to the situation in Ukraine.</p> <p>However, the US cybersecurity firm Mandiant said the announcement was a reminder of the damage that could be inflicted by Sandworm, which has been blamed for the devastating NotPetya attack on Ukraine in 2017. John Hultquist, a vice-president at Mandiant Threat Intelligence, said Sandworm remained a “capable and clever” adversary.</p> <p>“In light of the crisis in Ukraine we are very concerned about this actor, who has surpassed all others we track in terms of the aggressive cyber-attacks and information operations they have conducted,” he said. “No other Russian actor has been so brazen and successful in disrupting critical infrastructure in Ukraine and elsewhere.”</p> <p>Ukraine has suffered a string of cyber-attacks that Kyiv has blamed on Russia. Moscow, which is caught up in a mounting confrontation with the west over Ukraine, has denied any involvement.</p> <p>Wednesday saw a massive distributed denial of service (DDoS) attack that targeted websites of Ukraine’s government and banks.</p> <p>“At about 4pm, another mass DDoS attack on our state began. We have relevant data from a number of banks,” said Mykhailo Fedorov, minister of digital transformation, adding that the parliament website was also hit.</p> <p>Ukrainian authorities said this week they had seen online warnings that hackers were preparing to launch major attacks on government agencies, banks and the defense sector.</p> <p>Wednesday’s hack was consistent with the country’s tactics to distract and disrupt adversaries while “providing a level of plausible deniability”, said Rick Holland, chief information security officer at the cybersecurity firm Digital Shadows.</p> <p>“Russia didn’t just decide to invade Ukraine this week,” he said. “Military planners have prepared for this campaign years in advance. Disinformation, false flags, DDoS attacks, and destructive wiper malware are a part of Russian military doctrine; the battle plans have been drawn up and are now being executed.”</p> <p>The White House said on Wednesday that it was in touch with Ukrainian authorities about their cybersecurity needs, in the wake of the fresh cyber-attack, which the US government has not yet attributed.</p>

	“We are in conversations with Ukraine regarding their cyber-related needs including as recently as today and we’re going to move with urgency to assess the nature and extent of this, what steps need to be taken, and therefore a response,” the White House press secretary, Jen Psaki, said.
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HEADLINE	02/23 Conspiracy theorists turn to DuckDuckGo
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/23/technology/duckduckgo-conspiracy-theories.html
GIST	<p>On an episode of Joe Rogan’s popular podcast last year, he turned to a topic that has gripped right-wing communities and other Americans who feel skeptical about the pandemic: search engines.</p> <p>“If I wanted to find specific cases about people who died from vaccine-related injuries, I had to go to DuckDuckGo,” Mr. Rogan said, referring to the small privacy-focused search engine. “I wasn’t finding them on Google.”</p> <p>Praise for DuckDuckGo has become a popular refrain during the pandemic among right-wing social media influencers and conspiracy theorists who question Covid-19 vaccines and push discredited coronavirus treatments. Some have posted screenshots showing that DuckDuckGo appears to surface more links favorable to their views than Google does.</p> <p>In addition to Mr. Rogan, who has recently been at the center of an outcry about misinformation on his podcast, the search engine has received ringing endorsements from some of the world’s most-downloaded conservative podcasters, including Ben Shapiro and Dan Bongino.</p> <p>“Google is actively suppressing search results that don’t acquiesce to traditional viewpoints of the left,” Mr. Shapiro claimed last March. “I recommend you install DuckDuckGo on your computer, rather than Google, to combat all this.”</p> <p>The endorsements underscore how right-wing Americans and conspiracy theorists are shifting their online activity in response to greater moderation from tech giants like Google. They have increasingly embraced fledgling and sometimes fringe platforms like the chat app Telegram, the video streamer Rumble and even search engines like DuckDuckGo, seeking conditions that seem more favorable to their conspiracy theories and falsehoods.</p> <p>That attention has put search engines in a difficult position, fielding queries from a growing set of Americans who seem increasingly gripped by conspiracy theories. They must now try to deliver relevant results for obscure search terms and avoid surfacing possible misinformation, all while steering clear of censorship claims.</p> <p>DuckDuckGo, which has about 3 percent of the United States search market, holds little direct control over the links in its search results because they are generated by the search engine algorithm provided by Bing, which Microsoft owns. And all search engine algorithms are considered black boxes because the companies that create them do not completely disclose what informs their decisions.</p> <p>In a statement, DuckDuckGo said it condemned “acts of disinformation” and said the company’s internal surveys showed that its users had a wide mix of political orientations. The company said it was also studying ways to limit the spread of false and misleading information.</p> <p>For a glimpse at what conspiracy theorists encounter when they search online, The New York Times reviewed the top 20 search results on Google, Bing and DuckDuckGo for more than 30 conspiracy theories and right-wing topics. Search results can change over time and vary among users, but the comparisons provide a snapshot of what a single user might have seen on a typical day in mid-February.</p> <p>For many terms, Bing and DuckDuckGo surfaced more untrustworthy websites than Google did, when results were compared with website ratings from the Global Disinformation Index, NewsGuard and research published in the journal Science. (While DuckDuckGo relies on Bing’s algorithm, their search results can differ.)</p>

Search results on Google also included some untrustworthy websites, but they tended to be less common and lower on the search page.

The Times then reviewed a selection of those terms to check whether the content on the linked pages advanced the conspiracy theory or not. Those comparisons often showed even sharper differences between Google and its competitors.

Those findings matched results from two [recent studies](#), which concluded that Bing's algorithm surfaced content more supportive of conspiracy theories than Google did.

Differences among search engines in The Times's analysis were clearest when the terms were specific. For instance, searching for "Satanist Democrats," a theory that Democrats worship Satan or perform satanic rituals, surfaced several links advancing the conspiracy theory. But searching for more established claims, like the "QAnon" movement or [terms unrelated to conspiracies](#), surfaced more trustworthy results from all search engines.

The role of search engines has grown as online conspiracy theorists have placed more value on what they call "[doing your research](#)," which involves digging for content online to deepen conspiracy theories rather than relying on mainstream news outlets or government sources.

"Research, research, research," a Telegram user wrote in a channel devoted to fighting vaccine mandates. "Stay AWAY from Google searches, only use DuckDuckGo."

When people hunt for new information online, they tend to hold those findings in higher regard, said Ronald E. Robertson, a postdoctoral fellow at the Stanford Internet Observatory who has studied search engines.

"It's a lot more convincing to look up information, find it and feel that sense of discovery about it," he said. "You don't really feel like someone's telling you what the truth is, like you might on social media."

DuckDuckGo said it "regularly" flagged problematic search terms with Bing so they could be addressed. After The Times shared some data on search results for numerous terms spread by conspiracy theorists, several of the search results changed entirely, shifting to favor more trustworthy sources.

"Finding the right balance between delivering authoritative results that match the intent of a search query and protecting users from being misled is a very challenging problem," Bing said in a statement, adding: "We won't always get that balance just right, but that's our goal."

Kamyl Bazbaz, the vice president of communications for DuckDuckGo, said that its results were often similar to Google's and that most search terms reviewed by The Times received nearly no traffic.

While Google tended to surface links from trustworthy news sources more often, Mr. Bazbaz said adding a few more keywords to any given search usually surfaced the misleading information on Google anyway.

"If you're looking for this stuff, no matter where you're searching for it, you can find it," he said.

Other research has also found that Bing's algorithm surfaces less trustworthy information than Google does when searching for conspiracy theories. One [study](#) last year showed that slightly fewer than [half of all results](#) on Bing and DuckDuckGo for six popular conspiracy theories mentioned or promoted the ideas. Google fared better, with about a quarter of links mentioning the ideas but nearly none supporting them. Yahoo fared worse than Bing and DuckDuckGo, and the Russian search engine Yandex fared worst among the group.

Newer and more esoteric conspiracy theories are far more likely to return misleading results because of the so-called [data void](#). Conspiracy theorists tend to publish content about new ideas long before mainstream sources, dominating search results as the terms begin spreading online. Other topics never grab the attention of mainstream sources, giving the conspiracy theorists a long-term presence in search results.

Search engines have long been criticized for failing to address data voids. That criticism increased during the 2016 presidential election, when the spread of [misleading and false news stories](#) caused growing alarm among misinformation watchdogs. Around the same time, Google users [noticed](#) that a search for “did the Holocaust happen” surfaced a white supremacist website as its top result. Google tweaked its algorithm in response, now weighing a website’s reliability to a greater extent, alongside the content’s relevance to the search term.

Since 2021, Google has also [automatically](#) added warning boxes stating that “[results are changing quickly](#)” for terms that gain sudden popularity.

That [warning](#) appeared after Dr. Robert Malone, an infectious-disease researcher, appeared on “The Joe Rogan Experience” late last year. In that interview, Dr. Malone raised the discredited idea of mass formation psychosis, which describes a kind of groupthink mentality that supposedly persuaded the public to support pandemic countermeasures.

After the show, interest in the search term exploded, and the warning label appeared on Google’s results. Dr. Malone’s fans quickly claimed Google had targeted the term and removed links or edited the search results.

In a statement, Google said, “There is no merit to the suggestion that search results were manually edited.” But the company added that its algorithm would automatically adjust itself in some cases, shifting to rank trustworthy links higher than more relevant ones.

To combat data voids, search engines have also peppered their search results with information boxes surfacing more trustworthy information, like news carousels showing articles from trusted media sources higher in the search results. DuckDuckGo said it was working with researchers at Princeton University’s Center for Information Technology Policy to study how to mitigate disinformation through information boxes and “instant answers,” which the company already uses to augment results from Bing’s search algorithm.

Daniel Bush, a postdoctoral fellow at the [Stanford Internet Observatory](#), warned that the automated nature of search engines meant that conspiracy theorists would continue to prey on data voids to promote misleading information online.

“The data void is the key problem at the core of this technology, and there’s no algorithm that can fix it,” said Mr. Bush, who [analyzed](#) search results in 2019 and showed misinformation was more prevalent on Bing than on Google. “The more automated things become, the more vulnerable we are.”

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HEADLINE	02/23 Fake Spokane Co. Interstate Fair Facebook
SOURCE	https://www.krem.com/article/news/local/spokane-county/spokane-county-identifies-fake-fair-facebook-page/293-8bc2b861-d9f9-43c7-893d-0231cf8faf63
GIST	<p>SPOKANE, Wash. — Spokane County discovered a fake Facebook page imitating the Spokane County Interstate Fair.</p> <p>According to a press release, the fake account titled “Spokane-County Interstate’ Fair” has been active for about one week. At first sight, the account looks like the original one, as it copied many items from the main County Fair account. This includes posts and images of upcoming events happening at the fair.</p>

	<p>The fake account was first reported by Facebook followers who alerted the Spokane County Interstate Fair Office. The followers reported that they received messages asking to follow a registration link to claim fair tickets and enter their credit card information.</p> <p>Spokane County has alerted Facebook of the fake account. They are asking anyone who has received a friend request or message from the fake page to report it to Facebook and delete the request.</p> <p>Spokane County staff said they hope to have this problem resolved soon, and they said all other Spokane County social media pages remain secure.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/23 Entropy ransomware linked to Dridex
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/entropy-ransomware-linked-to-evil-corps-dridex-malware/
GIST	<p>Analysis of the recently-emerged Entropy ransomware reveals code-level similarities with the general purpose Dridex malware that started as a banking trojan.</p> <p>Two Entropy ransomware attacks against different organizations allowed researchers to connect the dots and establish a connection between the two pieces of malware.</p> <p>Dridex code used in Entropy ransomware</p> <p>In a report today, Sophos principal researcher Andrew Brandt says that deeper inspection of the Entropy malware was prompted by a detection signature that had been created for catching Dridex.</p> <p>Both victim organizations had unprotected machines, but the systems running endpoint protection stopped the attack, triggered by detecting the packer code for protecting Entropy, although the signature was for identifying the packer code for Dridex.</p> <p>SophosLabs analysts found that some of the other subroutines that Entropy relies on to hide its behavior were similar to those for the same functionality in Dridex.</p> <p>“The instructions that dictate how Entropy performs the first ”layer“ of unpacking are similar enough to Dridex that the analyst who looked at the packer code, and in particular the portion that refers to an API called LdrLoadDLL - and that subroutine’s behavior, described it as ”very much like a Dridex v4loader,“ and compared it to a similar loader used by a Dridex sample from 2018”</p> <p>There’s suspicion in the infosec community that Entropy ransomware is a rebrand of Grief (a.k.a. Pay or Grief) ransomware, which is a continuation of the DoppelPaymer operation.</p> <p>These suspicions grow stronger with today’s report from Sophos, which notes that the same packer code was detected on Sophos-protected systems targeted with DoppelPaymer ransomware.</p> <p>DoppelPaymer is attributed to the EvilCorp gang (a.k.a. Indrik Spider), which is behind the distribution of the Dridex banking trojan turned malware downloader via phishing emails.</p> <p>Members of EvilCorp and companies associated with the group have been sanctioned in 2019 by the U.S. Treasury Department, causing ransomware negotiation firms to stop mediating ransom payments to avoid fines and legal actions.</p> <p>EvilCorp decided to rename their ransomware operations, so sanctions could no longer be applied. Some of the ransomware names used are WastedLocker, Hades, and Phoenix.</p> <p>The Entropy ransomware operation started since at least November 2021, stealing data from breached networks. In the style of other ransomware operations, the Entropy group set up a leak site to publish the names of non-paying victims. As of this writing, the site lists nine organizations in the public and private sector.</p>

Entropy ransomware attacks

In the first attack that Sophos analyzed, the threat actor exploited ProxyShell vulnerabilities in Exchange Server for remote access into a media organization in North America and deployed Cobalt Strike beacons.

The attackers spent four months moving laterally and stealing data before encrypting computers using Entropy ransomware.

The second attack deployed the Dridex malware on a computer belonging to a regional government organization. Dridex was then used to funnel in other malware that allows pivoting to other systems.

“Significantly, in this second attack, only 75 hours passed between the initial detection of a suspicious login attempt on a single machine and the attackers commencing data exfiltration” - [Sophos](#)

Sophos notes that both attacks were possible because the targets had vulnerable Windows machines “that lacked current patches and updates.”

Keeping machines up-to-date and implementing multi-factor authentication (MFA) makes initial access a more difficult task for attackers, the researcher note.

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HEADLINE	02/23 LockBit, Conti target industrial sector
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/lockbit-conti-most-active-ransomware-targeting-industrial-sector/
GIST	<p>Ransomware attacks extended into the industrial sector last year to such a degree that this type of incident became the number one threat in the industrial sector.</p> <p>Two ransomware groups, LockBit and Conti, have been most active compromising organizations with an Industrial Control System (ICS)/Operational Technology (OT) environment in 2021.</p> <p>Ransomware threat is frequent in the manufacturing sector</p> <p>A report today from industrial cybersecurity company Dragos highlights that the industrial sector has become a more attractive target for both financially motivated adversaries and actors linked to state-sponsored groups.</p> <p>Monitoring the threat activity in the industrial sector last year, the company discovered a jump in ransomware incidents targeting ICS/OT networks.</p> <p>According to Dragos’ findings, the most common targets for ransomware groups were in the manufacturing sector, with 211 attacks accounting for 65%, followed by 35 successful compromises of companies in the food and beverages business, and 27 attacks against entities in the Transportation sector.</p> <p>The researchers note that the manufacturing vertical is the most exposed to attacks because this “sector is often the least mature in their OT security defenses.”</p> <p>An overview of the security of these companies reveals a troubling trend, the researchers say based on data collected during customer engagements</p> <p>Many organizations have very limited visibility into the infrastructure, fail to properly segment network perimeters, have many devices with an external connection, and a large percentage of shared credentials between the enterprise network (IT) and the OT environment</p> <p>The problems above lay the ground for successful attacks, allowing threat actors to pivot from the IT network into the OT segment, even if breaching the latter is not the main goal.</p>

This allowed the ransomware threat to become the number one cause for compromises in the industrial sector, the researchers note in the report.

“While ransomware mainly targets enterprise IT systems, there are a number of instances when it does impact OT directly and in integrated IT and OT environments” - [Dragos](#)

After gaining access to the IT network to execute the ransomware component, adversaries can move laterally into OT systems, allowing them to ask for larger ransoms by causing a more damaging impact.

LockBit and Conti attacks in ICS sector

Of the ransomware groups attacking the industrial infrastructure, LockBit and Conti are by far the most active, accounting for 51% of the incidents.

According to Dragos, the two ransomware groups are responsible for 166 attacks on companies in the ICS sector, LockBit accounting for 103 incidents and Conti for 63. The latter has taken [control of the TrickBot operation](#) recently and will likely increase its incursions into OT networks.

In 70% of all the ransomware incidents that Dragos analyzed, the targets were in the manufacturing sector, the most affected subsectors being metal products, automotive, plastics, technology, and packaging.

Ransomware threats are not showing any decline, despite governments prioritizing law enforcement efforts to bring ransomware-as-a-service (RaaS) operators and their affiliates to justice.

Dragos has high confidence that this threat will keep disrupting industrial operations and OT environments in 2022 because of either of the following three factors:

- Actors integrate OT kill processes into ransomware payloads
- Operators shutting down OT environments to prevent ransomware from spreading to the OT systems from the IT network
- Adoption of the simplified flat network design to lower cost and maintenance effort by reducing the number of routers and switches, which leads to a less secure environment due to lack of segmentation

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HEADLINE	02/23 Ukraine hit by more cyberattacks, malware
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Business/wireStory/ukraine-hit-cyberattacks-destructive-malware-83075533
GIST	<p>BOSTON -- Ukraine's parliament and other government and banking websites were hit with another punishing wave of distributed-denial-of-service attacks Wednesday, and cybersecurity researchers said unidentified attackers had also infected hundreds of computers with destructive malware.</p> <p>Some of the infected computers were in neighboring Latvia and Lithuania, the researchers said.</p> <p>Early Thursday local time in Ukraine, as fears of a Russian invasion heightened, the foreign ministry and council of ministers were unreachable and other sites were slow to load, suggesting the DDoS attacks were continuing, though there was no official confirmation.</p> <p>Officials have long expected cyber attacks to precede and accompany any Russian military incursion, and analysts said the activity hewed to Russia's playbook of wedding cyber operations with real-world aggression.</p> <p>ESET Research Labs said it detected a previously unseen piece of data-wiping malware Wednesday on “hundreds of machines in the country.” It was not clear how many networks were affected.</p> <p>“With regards whether the malware was successful in its wiping capability, we assume that this indeed was the case and affected machines were wiped,” said ESET research chief Jean-Ian Boutin. He would not name the targets but said they were “large organizations.” ESET was unable to say who was responsible.</p>

Symantec Threat Intelligence detected three organizations hit by the wiper malware — Ukrainian government contractors in Latvia and Lithuania and a financial institution in Ukraine, said Vikram Thakur, its technical director. Both countries are NATO members.

“The attackers have gone after these targets without much caring for where they may be physically located,” he said.

All three targets had “close affiliation with the government of Ukraine,” said Thakur, saying Symantec believed the attacks were “highly targeted.” He said roughly 50 computers at the financial outfit were impacted, some with data wiped.

Asked about the wiper attack, senior Ukrainian cyber defense official Victor Zhora had no comment.

Boutin said the malware’s timestamp indicated it was created in late December.

“Russia likely has been planning this for months, so it is hard to say how many organizations or agencies have been backdoored in preparation for these attacks,” said Chester Wisniewski, principal research scientist at the cybersecurity firm Sophos. He guessed the Kremlin intended with the malware to “send the message that they have compromised a significant amount of Ukrainian infrastructure and these are just little morsels to show how ubiquitous their penetration is.”

Word of the wiper follows a mid-January attack that Ukrainian officials blamed on Russia in which the defacement of some 70 government websites was used to mask intrusions into government networks in which at least two servers were damaged with wiper malware masquerading as ransomware.

Thakur said it was too early to say if the malware attack discovered Wednesday was as serious as the variety that damaged servers in January.

Cyberattacks have been a key tool of Russian aggression in Ukraine since before 2014, when the Kremlin annexed Crimea and hackers tried to thwart elections. They were also used against Estonia in 2007 and Georgia in 2008.

Distributed-denial-of-service attacks are among the least impactful because they don’t entail network intrusion. Such attacks barrage websites with junk traffic so they become unreachable.

The DDoS targets Wednesday included the defense and foreign ministries, the Council of Ministers and Privatbank, the country’s largest commercial bank. Many of the same sites were similarly knocked offline Feb. 13-14 in DDoS attacks that the U.S. and U.K. governments quickly blamed on Russia’s GRU military intelligence agency

Wednesday’s DDoS attacks appeared less impactful than the earlier onslaught — with targeted sites soon reachable again — as emergency responders blunted them. Zhora’s office, Ukraine’s information protection agency, said responders switched to a different DDoS protection service provider.

Doug Madory, director of internet analysis at the network management firm Kentik Inc., recorded two attack waves each lasting more than an hour.

A spokesman for California-based Cloudflare, which provides services to some of the targeted sites, said DDoS attacks in Ukraine have been sporadic and on the rise in the past month but “relatively modest compared to large DDoS attacks we’ve handled in the past.”

The West blames Russia’s GRU for some of the most damaging cyberattacks on record, including a pair in 2015 and 2016 that briefly knocked out parts of Ukraine’s power grid and the NotPetya “wiper” virus of 2017, which caused more than \$10 billion of damage globally by infecting companies that do business in Ukraine with malware seeded through a tax preparation software update.

	The wiper malware detected in Ukraine this year has so far been manually activated, as opposed to a worm like NotPetya, which can spread out of control across borders.
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Terror Conditions

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HEADLINE	02/24 ISIS used bullying, bribes to rebuild in Syria
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/02/24/islamic-state-syria-attacks/
GIST	<p>SHADADI, Syria — In the countryside around this market town, people prefer not to travel after dark. Rumors abound that militants stalk the roads then. Three years after the defeat of its self-declared caliphate, the Islamic State group is reconstituting itself in the Syrian shadows, and few villagers want to test their luck.</p> <p>“It’s not safe out there,” said Khalifa Salim al-Jeddal, 64, his grave expression framed with deep wrinkles from years in the sun. “There are places I know I can’t just get in my car and drive to. There are sleeper cells.”</p> <p>A farmer from the nearby village of Jallo, Jeddal knows the risks more than many. The militants tortured him when they ruled his village, he said. Now they’re growing in confidence again, sometimes wearing military fatigues that make them indistinguishable at a distance from the area’s U.S.-backed security forces.</p> <p>This is the Islamic State in 2022. No longer holding territory, as the group did until 2019, but lying low in small groups, operating with increasing sophistication and exploiting the breathing spaced afforded by Syria’s fractured politics to rebuild. They are also taking advantage of the local Kurdish-led administration’s struggles to fully govern the broad swath of northeastern Syria it has come to control since the fall of the caliphate, recruiting informants from impoverished communities and intimidating individuals who work with local government.</p> <p>The dangers were dramatically underlined last month when hundreds of Islamic State fighters assaulted a prison holding suspected militants in the northeastern city of Hasakah. American and British special forces were forced to join the 10-day battle to recapture it. More than 500 people died, about three quarters of them ISIS members, according to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).</p> <p>“These cells came from different places,” said Mazloun Kobane, who leads the U.S.-backed SDF in northeastern Syria. “They spread out people in neighborhoods around the prison to create chaos as soon as the attack began.”</p> <p>As the violence unfolded in Hasakah, militants were carrying out attacks elsewhere in northeastern Syria.</p> <p>At a rural checkpoint in Deir al-Zour province, Yasser was partway through another freezing night shift as a member of the region’s internal Kurdish-led security forces when he saw six men on motorcycles coursing down the otherwise empty road toward him. Two of them had suicide vests strapped to their chests, recounted Yasser, who described the event on the condition that his last name not be used because of safety concerns. He would later learn that similar attacks had unfolded at two other checkpoints.</p> <p>As some members of Yasser’s unit fled the ensuing gun battle, no one in the village offered them shelter.</p> <p>“People were whispering through the doors, telling us: ‘Please go. We can’t open the door for you,’” Yasser recalled. “They said, ‘If ISIS finds out, they will kill us.’”</p> <p>The militants have taken advantage of Syria’s political divisions to rebuild their fighting capabilities. Under pressure from the SDF and the U.S.-led military coalition, some Islamic State cells had retreated in 2019 from northeastern Syria to territory controlled by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s forces, where</p>

operations against the group were less sustained. Then, after the militants came under fire there, they slipped back into the Kurdish-led region.

“They had moved people to a more viable front for survival, and that was central Syria. Now the most viable front again is the northeast,” said Gregory Waters, a nonresident scholar at the Middle East Institute.

Mazloun and other SDF officials noted that some of the attackers in Hasakah appeared to have spent time in ISIS training camps in areas controlled by Assad’s forces, and the militants who returned to northeastern Syria have demonstrated a greater ability to carry out complex attacks.

In the past, Kurdish officials had said there was little coordination among the small sleeper cells operating in the northeast. But officials suggested after the Hasakah assault that it had involved three separate cells operating with high-level coordination and that there had been a centralized decision to carry out the attack.

Waters said that the Islamic State in Syria has again become capable of carrying out sophisticated operations. The group has developed “a slimmer, centralized core of veteran fighters who are linked into broader regional networks planning less-frequent but larger, more-complex attacks, while the more peripheral, decentralized cells carry out the day-to-day low-level insurgency,” he said.

Intelligence gathered in U.S. surveillance of Islamic State leader Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi in the months before he was killed in an American raid on Feb. 3 indeed indicated that he had stayed in touch with a network of underground cells in parts of Syria and Iraq.

Qurayshi’s death is likely to “disorient” the Islamic State group and reduce its effectiveness, at least for the time being, according to Hassan Hassan, the editor in chief of New Lines magazine. “For now, the group is in a weakened state, but that is not the same as not being dangerous,” Hassan said. He said that Qurayshi did not have wide appeal and that the selection of a new leader could enhance the “group’s odds at energizing its base and appealing to new people.”

As some Islamic State cells have returned to northeastern Syria, the SDF has found itself with less visibility into their operations than before. For one thing, it has little insight into militants’ activities in adjacent areas held by the Syrian government west of the Euphrates River or Turkish-backed forces in the north, and sometimes in neighboring Iraq.

“Everyone’s working in silo,” said Dareen Khalifa, a senior analyst at the International Crisis Group.

Islamic State militants have also capitalized on the Kurdish-led administration’s struggles to govern in majority-Arab areas that have fallen under its rule. Arab residents have protested over poor public services and what they describe as arbitrary detentions during anti-ISIS raids.

The militants exploit this discontent, paying some residents small sums to be informants, for instance supplying information about the activity of community leaders or the movement of security forces. In some cases, insurgents have intimidated and even killed people who cooperate with local government. As a result, Khalifa said, local authorities are finding it harder to generate intelligence about militant activities. “Some people don’t think [local] forces are capable of protecting them,” she said.

SDF officials point in particular to the region’s sprawling, ramshackle camps housing thousands of people displaced from their homes by fighting and poverty, where the militants might try to make inroads. Several dozen camp residents have been arrested in recent months, the SDF said, accused of offering support to the Islamic State in return for cash.

“ISIS is taking advantage of the poverty in this region,” said Farhad Shami, a spokesman for the SDF. “They have tried to use displaced people as a weapon,” he said.

	<p>The conditions in many of the camps are dire. Residents are at times short of bread and other food, wear threadbare clothes and burn trash for warmth against the winter cold.</p> <p>Camps around the city of Raqqa, once the capital of the Islamic State’s self-declared caliphate, have swelled in recent years as climate change and drought have accelerated the immiseration of tens of thousands of pastoralists who say they have had no choice but to migrate toward cities in search of work.</p> <p>But once they arrive, they find few opportunities. Many live in grinding poverty. For local notables and tribal elders who have acted as brokers between their communities and the SDF, the arrival of so many strangers has also limited visibility into what happens among the newcomers.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/23 IS group claims attack on Nigeria soldiers
SOURCE	https://federalnewsnetwork.com/government-news/2022/02/islamic-state-group-claims-attacks-on-nigeria-soldiers/
GIST	<p>ABUJA, Nigeria (AP) — Dozens of Nigerian soldiers were killed and wounded in recent attacks in Nigeria’s insecure northeast region, according to a statement from the Islamic State group, which said its West Africa members carried out the assaults.</p> <p>The attacks using explosives targeted soldiers on patrol at various checkpoints in Borno state, killing and wounding more than 30 soldiers, said the statement on the latest of the attacks released late Tuesday.</p> <p>The Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) is a breakaway faction of the Boko Haram extremist group which launched a rebel insurgency against the Nigerian government more than a decade ago.</p> <p>Nigeria’s military did not immediately respond to an inquiry for comment to confirm the attacks, but also reported killing “several” extremists and recovering a “large cache of weapons” and vehicles from the militants during “clearance operations” on Monday in Borno state in a location different from where IS said its fighters attacked.</p> <p>On Tuesday, IS militants targeted a Nigerian army patrol team with four explosive devices followed by mortar shells launched at a military camp in the town of Mallam Fatori, a few miles (kilometers) away from Nigeria’s northern neighbor Niger, the group said in one statement.</p> <p>An explosive device detonated during another ambush resulted in the death of three Nigerian soldiers in Mallam Fatori, it said, while “all those onboard” a military truck were either killed or wounded in yet another ambush on a Nigerian army convoy in Jiri town on the outskirts of Borno.</p> <p>Three attacks on Sunday and Monday killed and wounded “several” Nigerian soldiers, IS also said in separate statements, as the security forces continue to fall prey to the militants’ adoption of ambushes in areas where they seek to dominate and control especially along the Lake Chad axis.</p> <p>Since the death of Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau in mid-2021, the IS-linked group have sought to consolidate their position in the Lake Chad basin and northeast Nigeria over Boko Haram, though both the rival extremist groups remain united in an insurgency against the Nigerian government that has expanded to neighboring Niger, Chad and Cameroon and which has resulted in the death of thousands and displacement of millions.</p> <p>Amid the Nigerian military’s claims of successes in the war against militants, analysts as well as residents – some of who are being forced to return to their homes after being displaced for years – have argued that the extremist insurgency is far from over.</p> <p>The situation is still a “very, very dangerous (and) very threatening” crisis, the United Nations humanitarian chief Martin Griffiths told The Associated Press last month. It is “a very different kind of operation and very difficult also to deter.”</p>

HEADLINE	02/23 Taliban minister brags of suicide attacks
SOURCE	https://www.vice.com/en/article/g5qmpb/taliban-minister-muhammad-hanafi-suicide-bomb
GIST	<p>A senior Taliban minister has boasted about “historic” numbers of suicide attacks the Islamist group has carried out, while complaining that the group has yet to be recognised as Afghanistan’s official government by any other country in the world.</p> <p>Muhammad Hanafi, the Taliban’s minister for the propagation of virtue and prevention of vice, appeared in a video broadcast on national television and distributed by pro-Taliban social media accounts on Monday, in which he showed off about the brutal levels of violence meted out by the group over the past 20 years.</p> <p>The Taliban swept to power in August after the US military withdrew from the country. So far, not a single country has recognised the hardline Islamists as the country’s official government because of the group’s history of sheltering jihadi groups and its terrible human rights record against women, ethnic and religious minorities and anyone who dares criticise them.</p> <p>Hanafi — a senior member within the Haqqani network, which is notorious for extortion and kidnappings — was taking part in a conference talking about the “struggle” with being branded an international pariah.</p> <p>Hanafi’s ministry works as the country’s feared moral police, an institution found in some countries like Saudi Arabia and Iran. It had been scrapped under the US-backed government, but the Taliban brought it back last year and put its headquarters in the former women’s ministry.</p> <p>“History hasn’t recorded this many suicide attacks before,” said Hanafi, referring to the attacks using to it by the term “istishhadi”, an Arabic word widely used by jihadists that means “martyrdom”.</p> <p>“Didn’t we fight for 20 years to establish an Islamic system?” he added. “The struggle had two main goals: the end of foreign occupation and the rise of an Islamic regime, and it can only happen if we follow the words of God from the smallest to the biggest institution.”</p> <p>In his speech on Monday, Hanafi complained about the Taliban’s struggle to be recognised as Afghanistan’s legitimate government, blaming it on a “negative view” of the terms “virtue and jihad.”</p> <p>Afghanistan is hugely dependent on international aid, which has been largely withheld since the Taliban came to power. Last month, the United Nations called for the “largest-ever appeal” for a single country, calling for \$5bn (£3.68bn) in funding.</p> <p>Afghanistan’s previous government relied on aid for 80% of its annual budget, and the economy now faces a total collapse. The impact has been catastrophic, with desperate poverty now widespread. According to the UN agencies, from September to January, 9 million people received food assistance, and 276,000 children were treated for malnutrition.</p> <p>In his wide-ranging speech, Hanafi described Afghans who are critical of the Taliban fighters as “cowards,” and asked them to “redeem their mistakes, if they want to save their lives and dignity.” He urged them to “work and strive to live together under the flag of the Islamic Emirates.”</p> <p>He added: “Occupation has ended, and now it is time to follow the words of God and his prophet, and propagate for virtue and prevent vice, and all our problems will be lifted.”</p> <p>The Taliban is chasing international recognition but has made no concessions to the international community’s demands to end basic human rights violations. Despite the claims of “amnesty” from the group’s friendlier faces and promises of “inclusive” governance, the Islamists have tightened their grip</p>

	<p>over the power in Kabul, and reports of killings and kidnappings of prominent Afghan figures increase every month.</p> <p>The more extremist branches of the Taliban — including the Haqqani network, which has grabbed a substantial share of power in the new Taliban-led government in Kabul — have openly praised suicide bombers and launched initiatives to compensate their kin and family with cash and land.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/23 Guilty pleas: plot to attack power grid
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/23/us/power-grid-plot-race-war.html
GIST	<p>Three men pleaded guilty on Wednesday in a plot to attack power grids in the United States, which they believed could lead to economic and civil unrest and create the opportunity for white leaders to rise, federal prosecutors said.</p> <p>The men, Christopher Brenner Cook, 20, of Columbus, Ohio; Jonathan Allen Frost, 24, of West Lafayette, Ind., and of Katy, Texas; and Jackson Matthew Sawall, 22, of Oshkosh, Wis., each pleaded guilty in U.S. District Court in Columbus on Wednesday to one count of conspiring to provide material support to terrorists.</p> <p>They will each face up to 15 years in prison when they are sentenced. A date has not been scheduled.</p> <p>Kenneth Parker, the U.S. attorney for the Southern District of Ohio, said in a statement on Wednesday that the three men “conspired to use violence to sow hate, create chaos, and endanger the safety of the American people.”</p> <p>Timothy Langan, assistant director of the F.B.I. counterterrorism division, said in a statement that the three men expected their plot to lead to “economic distress and civil unrest.”</p> <p>“These individuals wanted to carry out such a plot because of their adherence to racially or ethnically motivated violent extremist views,” Mr. Langan said.</p> <p>Samuel Shamansky, a lawyer for Mr. Frost, said on Wednesday that Mr. Frost had “accepted complete responsibility for his reprehensible conduct.”</p> <p>“He has completely disavowed the racist viewpoints previously embraced,” Mr. Shamansky said. “Regrettably, Mr. Frost fell prey to the misinformation espoused on the internet and now recognizes how dangerous the medium can be. Moreover, Mr. Frost has committed himself toward rehabilitation and doing everything within his power to remedy his misdeeds.”</p> <p>Lawyers for Mr. Cook and Mr. Sawall declined to comment on Wednesday.</p> <p>In fall 2019, Mr. Frost and Mr. Cook met in an online chat group, and they began talking about the possibility of attacking a power grid, according to plea agreements. Within weeks, the two men began making efforts to recruit others and began sharing reading material that promoted white supremacy and neo-Nazism. By late 2019, Mr. Sawall, a friend of Mr. Cook’s, also joined the efforts, prosecutors said.</p> <p>As part of their plot, each man focused on substations in different regions of the country, and how to attack the power grids with rifles, according to court documents. The three men discussed that by knocking out power across the country for an extended period, civil unrest would spread, a race war could break out and the next Great Depression could be induced, according to court documents.</p> <p>“People wouldn’t show up to work, the economy could crash and there would be a ripe opportunity for potential (white) leaders to rise up,” Mr. Cook’s plea agreement said. “One theme of the group discussions centered around the need to create disorder to bring the system down, which would cause people to doubt the system and create a true revolutionary force against the system.”</p>

	<p>In February 2020, the three men met in Columbus for more talks about their plot, according to court documents. When they met, Mr. Frost gave Mr. Cook an AR-47, and the two men trained with the rifle at a shooting range, according to court documents.</p> <p>Mr. Frost also gave Mr. Cook and Mr. Sawall suicide necklaces that he had filled with fentanyl, which were to be ingested if they were caught by the police, according to court documents.</p> <p>While they were in Columbus, Mr. Sawall and Mr. Cook bought spray paint and used it to write the phrase “Join the Front” on a swastika flag under a bridge at a park, according to court documents. The men had more plans to spread propaganda while they were in Ohio until they encountered the police during a traffic stop, during which Mr. Sawall ingested his suicide necklace but survived, according to a plea agreement.</p> <p>It was not immediately clear on Wednesday night why Mr. Sawall and Mr. Cook had been stopped by the police at that time. A call to federal prosecutors on Wednesday evening was not immediately returned.</p> <p>The F.B.I. searched the homes of the three men in August 2020. Agents found multiple firearms, chemicals that could have been used to create an explosive device, and Nazi-related books and videos, according to court documents.</p>
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Suspicious, Unusual

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HEADLINE	02/23 UN study: wildfires more intense, frequent
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/wildfires-will-become-more-intense-and-frequent-u-n-study-finds-11645652588?mod=hp_featst_pos3
GIST	<p>Wildfires are expected to become more frequent and intense over the coming decades, according to new research from the United Nations.</p> <p>An increase of up to 57% in the number of wildfires is expected by the end of the century, according to the report released Wednesday by the U.N. Environment Programme and GRID-Arendal, an environmental group based in Norway.</p> <p>Fire seasons have become hotter, dryer and longer—fueled by a combination of increased drought, high-air temperatures, low-relative humidity, lightning and strong winds, according to the report, which had contributions from over 50 international researchers.</p> <p>From Europe to the Amazon and across the U.S. and China, wildfires are disrupting the environment, wildlife and human health. More frequent wildfires could drive some animals and plant species closer to extinction, the report said. The Australian bush fires of 2019 and 2020 are estimated to have killed billions of wild and domesticated animals, the report said.</p> <p>Clearing forests for agricultural purposes, and other man-made land-use changes, can alter the fire dynamics of a region and could contribute to more wildfires, according to the report.</p> <p>Climate change, meanwhile, has increased the frequency and magnitude of weather conditions that spread wildfires and has caused vegetation that doesn't usually burn, like rainforests and peat swamps, to dry out and combust, the researchers found. The researchers cited a review of 116 scientific articles written since 2013 on climate change and fire that conclude that a warming climate is increasing the likelihood of wildfires in many regions.</p> <p>A 2021 report by the U.N.'s advisory body on climate tied the type of extreme weather events seen in recent years—torrential floods in Europe and China, and forest fires in the U.S., Russia and elsewhere—directly to climate change. It said the effects of a warming climate are unequivocally driven by greenhouse-gas emissions from human activity, and may be irreversible for centuries.</p>

	<p>Douglas Kelley, one of the co-authors and lead data analyst for Wednesday’s report, said researchers used a model that incorporates data on greenhouse gas emissions from human activities to calculate estimates for how frequently major wildfires will burn in the coming decades. The model also uses data on vegetation—what grows in different parts of the world and how that can change over time—and land-use patterns, he said.</p> <p>Cutting back on emissions can reduce the risk of more frequent and intense wildfires, but only somewhat, Mr. Kelley said. Even with ambitious efforts to curb greenhouse gas emissions, significant wildfire events are projected to grow by at least 31% by 2100, according to the report. At the high end of the projection, major wildfire incidents like the 2019 and 2020 fires in Australia could increase by 57%.</p> <p>The researchers called on governments to increase funding focused on preventing wildfires rather than reacting to them. The Biden administration in January said it would expand efforts to prevent catastrophic wildfires by targeting at-risk areas with controlled burns and clearing trees and vegetation that can fuel blazes.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/23 Sea ice around Antarctica at record low
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/23/climate/antarctica-sea-ice-arctic.html
GIST	<p>Sea ice around Antarctica has reached a record low in four decades of observations, a new analysis of satellite images shows.</p> <p>As of Tuesday, ice covered 750,000 square miles around the Antarctic coast, below the previous record low of 815,000 square miles in early March 2017, according to the analysis by the National Snow and Ice Data Center in Boulder, Colo.</p> <p>“It’s really unprecedented,” said Marilyn N. Raphael, a professor of geography at the University of California, Los Angeles, who studies Antarctic sea ice. Warmer ocean temperatures may have played a role, she said, “but there are other factors that we will be working on finding out in the next months.”</p> <p>Antarctic sea ice extent is highly variable from year to year, but overall has increased very slightly, on average, since the late 1970s, when satellite observations began. By contrast, sea ice extent in the Arctic, which is warming about three times as fast as other regions, has decreased by more than 10 percent a decade over the same period.</p> <p>The two regions are very different. The Arctic Ocean covers high latitudes, including the North Pole itself, and is hemmed in by land masses. In the Southern Hemisphere, Antarctica covers the pole. The Southern Ocean, which surrounds the continent, begins at much lower latitudes and is open to the north.</p> <p>While rapid warming in the Arctic is largely responsible for the shrinking of sea ice there, the effect of climate change on Antarctic sea ice is far less clear.</p> <p>Edward Blanchard-Wrigglesworth, a climate scientist at the University of Washington, said that many scientists expect that global warming will eventually lead to declines in Antarctic sea ice. But right now, he said, “it’s really hard to connect the two, especially in terms of single events like this one.”</p> <p>Instead, a complex group of factors is at play when it come to Antarctic sea ice. Large-scale atmospheric patterns, often occurring far from the continent, as well as local ocean currents and winds can all increase or reduce sea-ice coverage.</p> <p>For instance, Dr. Blanchard-Wrigglesworth said, some research suggests that a strong El Niño in 2015 and 2016, when sea surface temperatures in the tropical Pacific were higher than normal, led to sharply lower sea ice coverage in 2016.</p>

Ted Scambos, a senior researcher at the Earth Science and Observation Center at the University of Colorado, said in an email message that warmer than normal sea-surface temperatures in some areas around Antarctica may have played a role in the current minimum.

And Dr. Raphael said winds may also have had an effect, especially in the area of the Amundsen Sea on the continent's western side. A region of low pressure air that regularly develops over the sea was especially strong this year, she said, and that resulted in stronger winds that may have driven more ice farther to the north, into warmer waters where it would melt faster.

While overall sea ice extent has only slightly increased since the late 1970s, the rate of increase began to accelerate in 2000, and ice extent reached a record high in 2014. But then something unexpected happened, Dr. Raphael said. It dropped drastically over the next three years, reaching the record low in 2017.

Since then sea ice extent rebounded, Dr. Raphael said, returning to roughly average levels by 2020.

Normally, she said, levels would then have continued to be average or above average for several years. But the new sharp drop this year occurred sooner. "It happened so quickly," she said.

"That's what makes this one unusual," she added. After 2017, "the ice went back to normal but didn't stay that way."

Dr. Blanchard-Wrigglesworth said that to understand why the ice extent is so low now, researchers will have to examine how conditions might have shifted last year. "I wouldn't be surprised if we find out that this is the result of changes in winds over the last three to six months," he said.

The low sea ice extent has been noticeable in the Weddell Sea, east of the Antarctic Peninsula, which because of its circular current retains much more ice from year to year than the other parts of the Antarctic coast. A group of scientists and explorers encountered relatively mild ice conditions while venturing into the sea this month in search of the wreck of Endurance, Ernest Shackleton's ship, which sank during an Antarctic expedition in 1915.

This year's ice extent could dip even lower, depending on the weather, but should soon start increasing as temperatures begin to drop heading into the Antarctic fall and winter. Ice coverage reaches a maximum each year around the end of September. The average maximum over four decades is more than 7 million square miles.

Dr. Blanchard-Wrigglesworth said that events like this one and the previous record low offered researchers an opportunity to better understand the connection between climate change and sea ice in Antarctica. "A valid new research question might be, are these the first few indications that there is starting to be a reversal in the long-term trends?" he said.

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HEADLINE	02/23 For sale: Seattle parking space \$50,000
SOURCE	https://www.king5.com/article/news/local/seattle/parking-space-for-sale-in-seattle/281-966c22b6-9183-4fa5-a058-3bfe9a797e34
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — Inside a pet-friendly building surrounded by plenty of restaurants in Seattle's Capitol Hill neighborhood, you'll find the latest hot listing, a 128-square-foot parking space listed at \$50,000.</p> <p>Jimmy Chuang is the realtor behind the deal on Bellevue Ave East.</p> <p>"It is a serious listing," Chuang said. "I don't think it's a common thing. This is actually the first time that I've ever seen it."</p>

	<p>According to the listing, this is “a once-in-a lifetime opportunity” to own a parking spot outright – you don’t even have to live in the building.</p> <p>“I do get a lot of calls and emails just to verify what exactly is this situation because it’s pretty rare to have a parking spot that’s in a condo building that is for sale that’s not attached to a unit,” Chuang said.</p> <p>It's a listing that's joining a sellers' market. Just last week, the average sales price of a home in King County topped more than \$1 million.</p> <p>“East of Lake Washington and the plateau was the hottest place to buy and still really is here in King County,” said Zach McDonald of Real Property Associates.</p> <p>McDonald said it’s not uncommon to see 20 or 30 offers on a home – homes that are often selling above the asking prices.</p> <p>“There aren’t enough houses for all the buyers and there are twenty to thirty buyers for every house. So when we think of basic supply and demand, I think that’s a big part of it,” McDonald said.</p> <p>So does \$50,000 for a parking spot sound like a deal?</p> <p>“The chances of having someone have condo parking that’s not attached to the unit I think is so rare that I don’t think we’ll see this happen in the future,” Chuang said.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/23 Kent police probe: woman in impound car
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/law-justice/ton-of-questions-over-how-woman-spent-9-days-trapped-in-impounded-car-kent-police-say/
GIST	<p>It could take a couple of weeks for Kent police detectives to unravel how a 28-year-old woman with disabilities ended up spending nine days inside a vehicle impounded in Burien earlier this month in near-freezing weather.</p> <p>“There are a ton of questions about why and how it happened. It’s still under investigation as we work through the details,” Assistant Kent Police Chief Jarod Kasner said Wednesday.</p> <p>Casey McNerthney, a spokesman for King County Prosecutor Dan Satterberg, said he doesn’t expect a case to be referred to prosecutors for review for possible criminal charges until sometime in March. He anticipated that detectives will need time to await results of the woman’s medical treatment before completing their investigation.</p> <p>The woman’s sister called Kent police on Feb. 14 to report her missing, police said. The woman was last seen on Feb. 5 in a Kent gas station with her 45-year-old mother, who parked the car and then left while her daughter was still inside the vehicle, according to police.</p> <p>During the investigation, police learned that gas-station employees had called Skyway Towing, and the vehicle, a 2004 Cadillac, was impounded in Burien.</p> <p>Officers called the private tow company on the day she was reported missing and asked them to check the car, said Bon Pauza, general manager for Skyway Towing.</p> <p>It’s common practice for employees to tow vehicles without checking inside, although the tow truck driver had looked through the windows before towing the vehicle, but didn’t see anyone inside, Pauza said.</p> <p>After police called, a driver searched the Cadillac and found the woman lying on the back seat covered with clothes and other items, he said.</p>

	<p>“We can’t really take credit for it,” Pauza said. “Police are the real heroes.”</p> <p>Neither Kasner nor McNerthney would comment on the nature of the woman’s disabilities or her current medical condition, citing patient-privacy laws.</p> <p>Her disabilities could well determine what charges could be filed in the case.</p> <p>Under state law, a vulnerable adult is defined as someone 60 years of age or older with a functional, physical, or mental inability to care for him or herself; or someone age 18 and older who has a developmental disability; a court-appointed guardian; lives in a facility licensed by the state; receives in-home services through a licensed health care agency or self-directs his or her own care.</p> <p>Mistreatment or abuse of a vulnerable adult is defined as “the willful action or inaction that inflicts injury, unreasonable confinement, intimidation, or punishment on a vulnerable adult.” Forms of abuse include sexual, mental, and physical abuse, abandonment, neglect, self-neglect, and financial exploitation.</p>
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Crime, Criminals

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HEADLINE	02/23 Campaign to end sex, labor trafficking
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/campaign-strives-to-end-sex-trafficking-in-king-county
GIST	<p>KING COUNTY, Wash. - One local organization is working to build awareness for the issues of human trafficking and provide lifelines for victims.</p> <p>Officials report hundreds of girls are trafficked for sex throughout King County.</p> <p>National numbers show in 2020, there was a 22% increase in online recruitment for trafficking.</p> <p>These issues are the reason why the local organization BEST (Businesses Ending Slavery and Trafficking) created the Not Alone campaign.</p> <p>"We want to speak directly to survivors and give them the chance to self-identify," said Rebekah Covington.</p> <p>Covington is the corporate relations manager for BEST. She came up with the idea for the Not Alone campaign.</p> <p>The campaign created posters that are specifically geared toward speaking to the victims of trafficking, and provides them with the resources they need to escape.</p> <p>More than 50 government agencies, government leaders, and transportation hubs both in Washington State, and across the country are partnering with the campaign.</p> <p>Covington believes this simple campaign may be the lifeline that helps people find freedom.</p> <p>Unfortunately, she is familiar with the trauma of being trafficked.</p> <p>"I got driven up to Aurora {Avenue}, and he said ‘get out of the car. This is where you’re going to be working. And don’t try to leave,’” she said.</p> <p>As a teenager, Covington says a traumatic experience affected her emotionally. She says due to her behavior, at 18 years old, her parents kicked her out of the house.</p>

	<p>She says during this time, a trafficker targeted her, coerced her, and groomed her for trafficking. Then, manipulated her into believing she did not have any other options.</p> <p>"They tell you threats, 'if you leave, I'll kill your family, I'll burn down your house.' So, you're scared to leave," she said.</p> <p>For nearly two years, Covington says she was trafficked here in Washington, and across the country. She says it was divine intervention that got her out of that life.</p> <p>Now, nearly two decades later, she hopes the Not Alone campaign will be the intervention to help others escape.</p> <p>"I already had that hope inside me, you know. So, I think that if I saw that it would have given me the ability to exit," she said.</p> <p>For more information on the work that BEST is doing, and resources for human trafficking, click here.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/23 Canada tribe: concern militant influences
SOURCE	https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-coastal-gaslink-attack-wetsuweten-nation-members-hereditary-chiefs-to/
GIST	<p>A group of nearly 120 members of the Wet'suwet'en Nation is calling for an emergency meeting with hereditary leaders after last Thursday's attack on workers at a construction camp for a controversial natural gas pipeline in northern British Columbia.</p> <p>"It remains very evident that the Nation is extremely divided and that militant outside influences have created a violent and confrontational dynamic onto our territories," said the letter dated Wednesday. Its signatories include Maureen Luggi, elected chief of the Wet'suwet'en First Nation, formerly known as the Broman Lake Indian Band. She and others supporting the letter say that it's time to find ways for reunification amid divisive issues, notably the Coastal GasLink pipeline.</p> <p>"One perceived solution: to make sure that the hereditary and elected leadership work together in all decision-making processes in recognition of the fact that both entities provide varying degrees and aspects of support to the Wet'suwet'en," the letter said.</p> <p>According to accounts from the RCMP and Coastal GasLink, about 20 masked people swarmed the company's remote work site in the early morning hours of Feb. 17, hitting some vehicles with axes and resulting in workers fleeing from the location. The attack has resulted in millions of dollars of damage and once again thrust the Coastal GasLink project into the spotlight.</p> <p>The project has been the target of sustained opposition from some Wet'suwet'en hereditary chiefs and their supporters, who say the company does not have the consent of hereditary leaders to build the pipeline through the Nation's traditional territory. About 190 kilometres of the pipeline route crosses through Wet'suwet'en traditional territory.</p> <p>The letter highlights the internal tensions and unresolved governance issues in the Wet'suwet'en Nation, which has a traditional governance system based on a system of clans, houses and hereditary chiefs but whose members are also part of communities organized under the band council system imposed by the Indian Act. The letter also highlights the discomfort some Wet'suwet'en Nation members felt as a result of the Coastal GasLink dispute becoming a magnet for people, and funds, outside the community.</p> <p>"A portion of Wet'suwet'en territory has been occupied by those from outside the Gidimt'en/Wet'suwet'en and are funded via donation campaigns ... however those who are primarily accessing those funds are not from the clan or our Nation but from those outside our Nation," the letter states.</p>

“It is also critical to understand that just because there are Wet’suwet’en Nation members who support the pipeline, does not in any way make them ‘less Wet’suwet’en,’ ‘less traditional,’ nor does it make them ‘sellouts.’”

The letter is addressed to one of the Wet’suwet’en house chiefs, Frank Alec, whose hereditary name is Woos, and to Molly Wickham, a subchief whose hereditary name is Sleydo’. Both have been prominent opponents of the pipeline and both recently made a submission to the United Nations Human Rights Council’s Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, a panel that reviews Indigenous rights concerns.

The Feb. 7 [submission](#), endorsed by groups including the Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs and Greenpeace Canada, says the “forced industrialization and police militarization of We’suwet’en land” violates Canada’s obligations under the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

The RCMP continue to investigate the attack, but no one has claimed responsibility. The Prince George Post quoted RCMP Chief Superintendent Warren Brown as saying that police “have no idea who the 20-plus are, but we have a good idea who one or two are” and would focus on those people and build the investigation from there.

The Office of The Wet’suwet’en, representing the hereditary chiefs, in a statement Monday said it did not have enough information to make any comments regarding the situation, but was concerned for people’s safety in the area and did not support violence.

The 670-kilometre Coastal GasLink pipeline would carry natural gas from northeastern B.C. to the West Coast and is a key link in the \$18-billion LNG Canada project now under construction in Kitimat, B.C.

On Twitter, a group identified as Gidimt’en Checkpoint that is campaigning against the Coastal GasLink project, said Wednesday that RCMP have been denying access to Wet’suwet’en people at the 27-kilometre mark of the Morice Forest Service Road.

“Our people have every right and responsibility to be on our own lands. A right that has never been extinguished and land that has never been ceded.”

The group did not immediately respond to requests for comment made through e-mail and social media.

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HEADLINE	02/23 Businesses tired of reporting shoplifting
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/seattle-businesses-fatigued-by-reporting-shoplifting-cases-with-no-end-in-sight
GIST	<p>SEATTLE - There’s been a two-year decline in the number of shoplifting cases referred to Seattle Police (SPD) from the city’s biggest retailers, despite claims by many businesses to the contrary.</p> <p>The claim came during a presentation to the Seattle City Council by SPD, involving an update to the department's ‘Retail Theft Program’ that’s been in existence since 1989.</p> <p>Currently, there are 63 store chains signed up for the program, where loss prevention officers file reports of theft to SPD, rather than send an officer to the scene to investigate.</p> <p>Since 2019, 2,583 cases have been referred to SPD, which Assistant Police Chief Tom Mahaffey said is a decline from years past.</p> <p>He says the decline stems from stores not hiring their own private security to report the crimes, and a ‘hands off’ policy by retailers to not interfere and detain the thief.</p>

"They're giving their employees direction that we're not going to have you address this right now," said Mahaffey.

He said because of police staffing issues, officers are treating shoplifting as a lower-priority call.

"We don't have the capacity to respond to these calls because of recent staffing," said Mahaffey.

Police recently arrested John Lomack for allegedly stealing a \$600, 70-inch TV from the [downtown Seattle](#) Target store.

Police say surveillance video shows him putting the TV, still packed in its box, onto a shopping cart, shoving it into a crowded elevator and pushing it out the door despite attempts by Target security officers to grab the TV.

Court documents say Lomack has stolen from this Target store 22 times.

Two weeks ago, police conducted a special shoplifting enforcement at the Target, arresting 21 people. 18 were booked into jail, but were later released because of the jail's current policy of not holding non-violent misdemeanor offenders. A single case of theft under \$750 is considered a misdemeanor.

Lomack was later arrested for stealing the TV and charged with organized retail theft, which is a felony. A King County judge decided to release him, with the promises he'll appear for his court dates.

"People are not reporting because they don't get a response [from SPD] to it," said Song Ho, who owns a convenience store in Seattle's [Belltown](#) neighborhood.

"Five or six years ago, the police response was right away—sometimes within three minutes, sometimes one minute," said Ho. "These days, you call them, there's no response whatsoever, that's why people are not reporting."

He said he's sorry to see the theft situation deteriorate.

"What's the point of reporting, when you need the help now, not four hours later?" Ho asked.

He said he now takes matters into his own hands when he catches a shoplifter, rather than call police. He didn't say what tactics he's using.

"I'm going to rely on myself, I don't have a choice," Ho said.

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HEADLINE	02/23 FBI: 57 bomb threats HBCUs since Jan.
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2022/02/23/fbi-bomb-threats-hbcu-worship/
GIST	<p>The FBI said 57 historically Black colleges and universities, places of worship, and other faith-based and academic institutions received bomb threats between Jan. 4 and Feb. 16. The bureau is investigating the incidents as hate crimes.</p> <p>Hampton University on Wednesday was the latest historically Black school to be targeted, the school said in a statement. The incident is among dozens of threats that have been made against HBCUs since the beginning of the year, sparking fear, anger and anxiety on campuses.</p> <p>The threats have been made via phone call, email, instant message and anonymous posts online, the FBI said in a statement Wednesday. The agency has said its investigation is "of the highest priority," with 31 FBI field offices working with local, state and federal law enforcement.</p> <p>Authorities have yet to find any explosive devices, but officials said that the threats are being treated with the "utmost seriousness" and that law enforcement "will remain vigilant to protect our communities." Agents are conducting hundreds of interviews and gathering electronic evidence, officials said.</p>

	<p>“We recognize the fear and disruption this has caused across the country, and we will continue our work to make sure people feel safe in their communities, schools and places of worship,” officials said.</p> <p>The FBI on Feb. 2 said as many as six juveniles were suspected to be involved in making threats.</p> <p>The threat at Hampton University in Virginia came Wednesday around 8:45 a.m., the university said in a statement. The campus of about 3,500 students was placed on lockdown.</p> <p>At least eight HBCUs were threatened Jan. 4, and six received threats Jan. 31. On Feb. 1, at least 16 universities closed or swept their campuses.</p> <p>More schools since then, including North Carolina A&T State University, Howard University, Fayetteville State University and Spelman College, have received threats. Howard and Spelman also had received earlier threats.</p> <p>The FBI has encouraged people who notice suspicious activity to submit a tip.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/23 Auburn police: fatal shooting in park
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/police-investigating-fatal-shooting-at-veterans-memorial-park-in-auburn
GIST	<p>AUBURN, Wash. — Police were searching for clues and a suspect after a man was shot and killed Wednesday evening at Veteran's Memorial Park in Auburn, authorities said.</p> <p>Investigators were called to the park, located at 405 E. Street NE in Auburn, about 6:15 p.m. for a report of gunfire, a police spokesperson said.</p> <p>When police arrived, they found a man laying on the ground suffering from gunshot wounds.</p> <p>Paramedics tried to revive the man but he died at the park. Live video from Air 4 showed a large section of the park surrounded by yellow crime scene tape.</p> <p>It was not clear if the victim knew the person who shot him or what led to the gunfire.</p> <p>No other injuries were reported.</p>
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